THE AUTONOMOUS JOURNEY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO PERSIST

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
July 2015
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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
JULY 2015
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my best friend and wife, Heather. Your support and inspiration throughout this long journey have allowed me to complete this meaningful project. Your unyielding support, patience, and encouragement provided me with the motivation that I needed to become the person I am today. You have been the light in the darkness, the warmth in the winter, and the sunflower of my life. I can only hope to have many years left upon the earth in which to repay your support of my dreams and your never-ending strength. Proverbs tells us that an excellent wife is more precious than jewels, and to that I say amen. You are a precious gift and I hope to honor you in all that I do. To you, I shall remain eternally grateful.
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For my committee members, Dr. Nancy Brooks, Dr. Jon Clausen, Dr. Tom McConnell, it is impossible to express my gratitude for your commitment and support throughout the dissertation process. Your willingness to guide and support my aspirations reveals your service and commitment to the development of your students. I deeply appreciate and value your skills and insight that have helped to shape this study.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem and Context

With the expanding rhetoric of politicians and business leaders advocating the need to increase the number of college graduates in the United States (Casey, 2011; Martinez, 2011; Schneider, 2010), more must be done to address the scourge of student attrition (Rosenbaum, 2007). Year after year eager students flock to institutions of higher learning in ever-increasing numbers (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2013), as dropout rates continue their unabated and voracious feeding upon the would be scholars. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2014) less than 59% of first time, full-time public college and university students graduate within six years. These statistics indicate that 41% of first time, full-time students will most likely fail to achieve their desire for a college degree. However, this is simply the beginning of their sorrows. Astonishing, as it may be, the completion rate of first time, full-time students enrolled in a public institution is a meager 31% within the traditionally allotted timeframe of four years (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPED, 2014). With such alarming statistics, student attrition within the world of higher education deserves further exploration.

While the literature is replete with theories of persistence and retention (Braxton, 2008) that include fostering an understanding of the periods of transition (Barefoot, 2008) or emphasizing student incorporation (Tinto, 1975, 1986, & 1993), such theories do not address the autonomous actions and attitudes of students as they experience postsecondary life. There remains adequate room to explore other possible factors related to persistence and degree attainment that integrate the manner in which students direct his or her personal experiences as
well as the motivations that drive the action or inaction of the individual. The possible influence connecting the attitude and the ability to self-direct (Dworkin, 1988), throughout the college experience remains underexplored (Buvoltz, Powell, Solan, & Longbotham, 2008; Crede, & Niehorster, 2012) and may be useful to bolstering student persistence.

Autonomy is a social construct that remains difficult to define, yet elucidates characteristics aspired to by most members of society (McAvoy, 2013; Schneewind, 2005). These characteristics often overlap with the language used to describe qualities of a successful student, which include one who exercises creativity, authenticity, and originality (Clifford, 2007; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987). Of further significance beyond the academic experience, when considering the qualifications of a fully participating member of the modern democratic society, these very characteristics remain essential to its continuance (Heyneman, 2003; Thorpe, 2010). Therefore, one can speculate that serving the needs of the individual student in his or her quest of attaining a college degree, by fostering autonomous attributes, also serves the needs of society beyond the collegiate experience.

Plato (trans. 1935) understood the correlation between serving the interests of the individual as well as society in the ability to comprehend one’s capacity to achieve his or her fullest potential through education. This perception is echoed through the exploration of such educational and philosophical scholars as Bruner (1996), Eisner (1985), Rawls (1999) and Raz (1986) all who emphasized a connection between achieving one’s potential and contributing to the furtherance of a democratic society. Taylor (2005) advances the idea that autonomy “celebrates creative self-authorship and encourages the development of those virtues…integrity and authenticity” (p. 602), which serve the needs of both the individual in his or her pursuit of education and society in its need for active citizenship. It has been argued that in order to
address the needs of living in a highly fluid and complex society, students of the 21st Century must develop these very virtues (Mayer, 2003; Rosefsky Saavedra & Opfer 2012; Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010). As such, the ability to achieve higher levels of education in the pursuit of fulfilling one’s potential must become a paramount concern for all members of society.

Consistently, scholars have heralded the concept that society requires free, authentic, autonomous, and original thinkers (Darwall, 2006; Emerson, 1841; Fisher, 1961; McGlynn, 2011; Sadovnik, 2007), who are capable of making informed decisions even under the duress of coercion (Kant, 1797/1965). Truly the current educational system seeks to develop these attributes and persisting to graduation would serve to fulfill this societal need (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It was Emerson (1841) who championed the notion that, whoever would be free, must be a “nonconformist” (n.p.) who follows his own mind and possesses the capacity to believe in himself, knowing for himself what must be true. The challenge of such a view centers on the plurality of this contested and ambiguous term. Consider for a moment that autonomy can be viewed through the lens of a variety of philosophical perspectives such as Kant’s categorical imperative (Schneewind, 2005) or John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian liberalism (as cited in Aviram, 1993), and still remain free of restrictive properties. Further, it can be observed as a specific form or function as in learner autonomy (Ryan, & Deci, 1987) individual autonomy (Wall, 2007) or even liberal autonomy (Levey, 2012; Rawls, 1993; Raz, 1986).

This study served to explore autonomy within the context of higher learning, as it is during this developmental period that students seek to define who they wish to become in the form of an adult identity (Chickering, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Specifically, this exploration will be focused on the lived experiences of first-generation students considering the potential influence, if any, on academic persistence. As the roles and responsibilities of adulthood necessitate the
defining of individual values and needs, the development of independence and self-sufficiency are requisites for establishing an adult identity during the college years (Baxter, 1999).

In order to elucidate the benefits of exploring autonomy within the confines of higher education, a foundation of understanding must be positioned that exemplifies the societal expectation of more and more citizens attending college (Handel & Montoya, 2009; Wolf, 2009). In its quest to lead the world in acquired college degrees, the current American educational anthem, as affirmed by President Obama and Educational Secretary Arne Duncan, is “college-for-all” (Casey, 2011; Martinez, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2007, p. 55). In itself, the desire to increase an equitable system of education that promotes a higher degree of academic attainment is indeed a worthy cause. As demonstrated by a recent report offered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) entitled Education at a Glance 2014, we see a distinct economic advantage to those who possess a college degree. In fact, when compared to those who do not hold a degree the report outlined well-defined benefits that included an increase in the likelihood of establishing and maintaining fulltime employment, an earning expectation of “70% more than those who have attained…secondary education” (p. 39), and an overall increase in human capital.

Within any given society, the benefits of increased degree attainment are not exclusive to the individual alone. In reality, the symbiotic nature of degree attainment moves beyond the individual and serves to benefit society through a greater emphasis on educational equality. This is played out as educational attainment is viewed as an investment that serves to decrease “social welfare programmes and [increase] revenues earned through taxes” as individuals enter the labor market with a greater earning potential (OECD, 2014, p. 42). Clearly, the emphasis that is motivating political leaders to call for an increase in college degree attainment is valid.
However, the anthem that college is truly for all remains somewhat disingenuous as evidenced by the number of students who fail to complete their studies and choose to end their academic journey prematurely. If the focus of American educational policy is on degree attainment, then the obligation exists to pursue every conceivable factor that positively or negatively affects student achievement. The current study asserts that the future of America, the continuation of its democratic society, lies not in theories of persistence, but rather in the development of educated autonomous beings laboring in unity toward a common goal (Dodson, 1997; Heyneman, 2003; Thorpe, 2010; Waldron, 1989). Such a society of individuals would then be capable of addressing the complex and multifaceted problems of living in the 21st Century. Therefore, this journey must begin by examining the problem of persistence in the context of higher education.

The myriad of motivations behind earning a college degree are as diverse as the students themselves, who embrace the vagaries of a better life through economic positioning or meeting the family expectation of graduating (Phinney, Dennis & Osorio, 2006). Yet, the function of institutions of higher learning surpasses the mere attainment of academic erudition, progressing to characteristics that serve to enrich both the life of the student and the requisites of a rational society (Rudolph, 1962). Accepting this premise precipitates the comprehension that an urgent societal need rests upon the simple notion that as the tide of those seeking a college degree crests, so too peaks the growth of society. And as the demands of any rational society do not exist to frustrate the individual (Hegel, 1821), the collective pursuit of promoting and supporting the individual quest of academic degree attainment must be relentless.

However, as discussed earlier, the current educational trend suggests that while access has increased, rates of college persistence continue to decrease (Bragg & Durham, 2012).
Recall, that according to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010) and the U.S. Department of Education (2013), four-year institutions report a 59% college completion rate within six years of enrollment, while two-year institutions report a meager 31% rate of completion within three years of enrollment. Further complicating this problem is the realization that nearly 25% of all college students dropout of four-year institutions between their second and third academic terms (Ryan, 2004), with over 50% doing so at the two-year institutional level (US Department of Education National Center on Education Statistics, 2010, 2013). Thus, motivations and attitudes for the autonomous action of persisting when others are dropping out deserve further consideration.

Many students report upon enrollment they encountered unanticipated high levels of psychological distress associated with the rigors of attending an institution of higher learning, which then contributes to their departure (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benson, 2003; Dohney, 2010; Gray, 2010; Kitzrow, 2003; Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012; Rice, Richardson & Clark, 2012). It has been asserted that academic performance and college-related stressors such as resource allocation, scholarship expectation, and prioritization have been identified as significant causal factors to this recognized level of distress (Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001; Heiligenstein & Guenther, 1996; Weber, Metha, & Nelson, 1997). This distress is amplified during periods of transition (Barefoot, 2008) and becomes highly complex as the student progresses through passivity into an active learner who assumes greater responsibility of learning (Hussey & Smith, 2008).

Of equal interest, studies report that a direct correlation exists between psychological distress and the lack of control, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Dalgard, Thapa, Hauff, McCubbin, & Syed, 2006; Sher-Censor, Parke, & Coltrane, 2011; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009).
While there exists a plethora of research on the benefits of learner autonomy, as a remedy to these conditions on the academic course level (Clifford, 2007; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987), the literature is extraordinarily quiet on individual personal autonomy and academic success in terms of degree attainment. Speaking more candidly, if there exists a connection between course success and learner autonomy, would it then not follow that individual autonomy, the evolutionary expansion of learner autonomy, is a means for academic success in the form of student persistence and degree attainment? If learner autonomy facilitates student achievement in a specific course, then it could be assumed that cultivating a holistic form of personal autonomy would, theoretically, improve student persistence and degree attainment. Hence, this study acknowledges the rigorous conditions associated with higher education, and seeks to extend the understanding of autonomy through a journey of the lived experiences of first-generation university students who have persisted and attained their desired level of education.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the awareness and fostering of autonomy as experienced by first generation university undergraduates or recent graduates at a midsized Midwest public university, and view its potential influence on academic persistence. Employing the descriptive tradition of phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1970/1936; Vagle, 2014), and building upon theories of student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993) and learner autonomy (Holec, 1981), this study sought to gain additional knowledge concerning the conditions that contribute to and further extend our understanding of how autonomy may influence college persistence. The study was grounded in the literature of academic persistence and the evolution of the highly debated concept of autonomy. Further, the
backdrop for this exploration was the U.S. system of education, based within a participatory democracy. The intention of the study was to generate a new perspective on degree attainment by furthering the literature beyond learner autonomy and course success, to individual autonomy and degree attainment. The study holds a natural bent toward education, as the development of autonomy is influenced through the social and academic experiences of students.

**Research Questions**

The following overarching question served as a guide for the exploration of the research by providing structure for the inquiry process and data analysis (Janesick, 2000):

- How is autonomy perceived and experienced by first-generation university undergraduate students, or recent graduates, and do those experiences influence academic persistence?

Further shepherding the study were the following research sub-questions:

1. How do first generation university students experience autonomy regarding the decision to attend an institution of higher learning?
2. How do first generation university students define the nature and conditions of autonomy development?
3. How do first generation university students experience autonomy in relation to academic persistence?

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that student persistence and retention have traditionally been studied through a quantitative paradigm illuminating the positive correlations between student services, engagement, and academic attainment. However, when seeking to better understand the experiences of first generation college students and autonomy, these correlations fail to adequately give voice to the attitudes and motivations of the individual. The research questions are, therefore, designed in a manner that allows each participant to share his
or her unique experiences and articulate the story behind their journey. To fully appreciate the rich life stories of first generation college students that explores the meaning making process behind the decision to act or not, a constructionist epistemology, which is a qualitative paradigm, was applied (Cresswell, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Mertens (1998), the theoretical framework holds ramifications for each decision reached throughout the research journey. Therefore, this study was firmly situated in a social constructivist worldview that investigates the limits of human knowledge (Cresswell, 2002, 2007). Further, it utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach supported by Giorgi (2009) and Vagle (2014), as the worldview informs the research process concerning the meaning first generation college students and recent graduates assign to autonomy and its influence on academic persistence. Creswell (2009) uses the language of “worldview” (p. 6) to identify the principles and beliefs that serve to guide the research. For example, as this study sought to better understand the meaning ascribed to a phenomenon through the perspective of multiple participants, as they engage in the world in which they live, social constructivism offers an appropriate theoretical perspective to inform the research.

It is in the individual meaning making process where Crotty’s (2010) vision of constructivism, which serves to explore the distinct experiences of the “individual mind” (p. 58) confirming and validating the private perspectives held by the participants, draws life to inform this study. In this, we celebrate the “epistemological consideration…[of] the meaning making activity” (p. 58) through the application of a constructionist theory. It is through this interpretation, the ability to make “sense of what is experienced” (Cobern, 1993, p. 109), where this study has focused. Through a phenomenological exploration, these individual experiences
will be explored culminating in a collective or group essence of first generation college students and autonomy. As such, this form of phenomenology embraces a theoretical perspective that weaves between interpretive and descriptive, which remains open to the “phenomenon to reveal its own complexity” (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008, p. 112).

In the end, our world is comprised of a myriad of individuals simultaneously constructing a multitude of realities and this study has served to validate and demonstrate the worthiness of each perspective of those within the study. This study sought to investigate the meaning students ascribe to his or her lived experiences with autonomy and explore these perceptions in an attempt to understand how individual interactions may serve to influence academic success (Patton, 2002). By recognizing the purposeful decision to use Creswell’s (2007) social constructivist worldview, this proposed study will be encouraged to maintain uniformity between the stated research purpose, the research questions, and the methods chosen to address each (Crotty, 1998).

Methodology

The philosophical inquiry of phenomenology was employed in this research project, as the logic of justification for utilizing the qualitatively driven method of semi-structured interviews (Cresswell, 2007). Drawing upon the work of such phenomenologists as Giorgi (2009), Husserl (1970/1936), Moustakas (1994), and Vagle (2014) this study was grounded in the rich tradition of descriptive phenomenology with the intention of illuminating the finite descriptions of the lived experiences regarding autonomy by each participant. Specifically, through the approach of phenomenology the study was granted the opportunity to take a second look at autonomy, not as a means for successfully completing a specific course, but through a new exploratory lens viewing autonomy in relation to academic persistence. This study sought to examine the full “opinions, beliefs, values, and assumptions” of the participants in order to
enrich the understanding of autonomy as experienced by first generation students (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 84). As the study will established a better understanding of how students contextualize his or her experience with autonomy, it will also explored the ascribed meaning students place upon this socially constructed notion within the context of those who persist in higher education to attain a university degree.

**Definition of Relevant Terms**

When discussing such contentious terms as autonomy, persistence, and attainment, it is imperative that each word be purposefully operationalized and utilized consistently throughout the study. Please note that throughout this study the terms of college, university, postsecondary education, and higher education will be used interchangeably. For the intended research study, the subsequent definitions will be followed:

**Autonomy.** As defined by Christman (2011) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “to be autonomous is to be one’s own person, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one’s authentic self” (n.p.). For the purposes of this study, autonomy will be nominally defined as the capacity to direct one’s own course in life (Rawls, 1999, Raz, 1986), free of coercion (Kant, 1784/1996; Kekes, 2011), in the exercise of self-direction and self-regulation (Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand, Bouffard, 2013; Dodson, 1997; Pintrich, & DeGroot, 1990). Further, autonomy will be considered through the exploration of both the action or inaction of an individual, as well as the motivations and attitudes concerning the action (Dworkin, 1988).

**Learner Autonomy.** For the purpose of this study, a constructivist perspective on defining learner autonomy was assumed, as the student’s capacity and motivation to become
actively engaged in the educational process through experience and discovery (Zoghi & Dehghan, 2012). Moreover, according to Holec (1981) learner autonomy is only possible when a framework exists that allows the learner to assume an active role. It is in this vein where individuals strive to discover and construct meaning as a basis of the educational enterprise. Further, students who engage in the self-governing and self-determined constructivist method of learning also experience greater success and value in the educational activity as opposed to those who simply consign the compulsory response to memory for later recollection (Pintrich, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Personal Autonomy.** The self-governing provocation of an act, by an autonomous agent, in the absence of regard for right or wrong, is what constitutes personal autonomy. This position incorporates the individual power, beyond political, social, or customary right, to initiate action (Buss, 1994).

**Liberal Autonomy.** Liberal autonomy is a value that articulates the cornerstone of liberal political morality, establishing individual liberties and attitudes of justice in both public policy and law (Levey, 2012). This principle will become relevant in the discussion of the participatory nature of living in a modern democracy (Feinberg, 1973).

**First Generation College / University Student.** Students who enroll in college or university when neither parents nor guardians have attended an institution of higher learning (Hirudayaraj, 2011). As indicated by the previously discussed OECD (2014) report, less than one third of American adults have surpassed the education of their parents, thus making this subgroup a significant population for study (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

**Academic Retention.** According to the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the rate of academic retention is an institutional measurement at
which “students persist in their educational program...from the previous fall [and] who are again enrolled in the current fall” (n.p.). The emphasis is on those who continue in a program from year to year.

**Academic Persistence.** According to the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2005), academic persistence is a student-driven measurement of individuals who persevere to academic degree or certificate completion. The significance is on the completion of a course of requirements thus culminating in a degree or certificate of completion.

**Academic Attainment.** Realizing one’s educational goal, whether it is in the form of an academic degree, certificate, or simply the renewing of the mind by attending a class of formal learning, constitutes academic attainment (Evenbeck & Johnson, 2012). The importance is centered on the individual attainment of one’s intellectual aspiration.

**Significance**

Mark Schneider (2010) of American Institutes for Research, plainly stated, “the nation will have a difficult time reaching the administration’s policy goals [the highest concentration of college-educated adults] unless we find ways to increase the number of students who return to complete their college degrees” (p. 1). With the level of first generation student enrollment on the rise, this legitimate concern deserves the attention of institutions as they seek to adequately prepare for this shift in college student demographics. As confirmed by the OECD (2014) report and discussed by McGlynn (2011) and Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012), first generation college students face a unique set of personal, educational, and institutional barriers that frustrates the educational endeavor and inhibits the development of autonomy. For example, many first generation students, living in low-income communities, enter college from secondary
schools with a history of poor academic performance (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994). These schools, with less qualified educators (Silva Mangiante, 2011) and an overemphasis on high stakes standardized testing (Nichols, 2007), present students with limited experience in fostering the autonomous concepts of self directed learning (Candy, 1991) and self-regulation (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Zimmerman, 2000). Further, McGlynn states that most first generation students lack the knowledge necessary to secure external sources of funding and therefore, are straddled with the burdens of paying for college themselves. These situations place first generation students at a clear disadvantage, and further legitimize the need to study them as a unique subgroup of college students (Wells, 2008).

It is significant to note that first generation students generally enter the complex world of higher education with a limited range of social and cultural capital when compared to second-generation students (Wells, 2008). Exploring the dynamics that contribute to the persistence and consequent graduation of first generation students holds significant educational, social, and economic ramifications. According to a leading educational consultant of the Educational Policy Institute, Dr. Raisman (2013), estimates that those who have dropped out of college have cost the nation’s colleges and universities a collective $16 billion in lost revenue. Combine that with Schneider’s insistence that the US spends billions of grant dollars each year on first year students who fail to return for their second year and a picture begins to come into focus illustrating the need to address student attrition. The loss of tuition dollars and associated fees translates into higher costs for those students who persist to graduation. It also serves to frustrate and unbalance the stability of institutions that are operating within fixed state and federal budgets. The Educational Policy Institute also notes that students who dropout leave with an estimated $19,000 of school related debt as well as the emotional and personal cost of unrealized potential
(Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rouke, 2011). This proposed study has the potential to extend the literature regarding persistence and to better equip institutions in their struggle against student attrition, which in turn will support the needs of a modern society.

In 1875, poet William Ernest Henley penned the poem *Invictus* (Cornford, 1913). By reviewing this poem one can read of the unquenchable determination of the human spirit to endeavor, regardless of circumstance. Irrespective of condition through the lines of the poem it becomes clear that by directing one’s life, beyond the reach of coercion of external influence or internal desire, the individual can be stirred to achieve the unachievable. So, too, must be the anthem of the modern day college student. As such, the relentless pursuit of stemming the tide of attrition, through a deepening understanding of autonomy, is the primary significance of this proposed study.

There exists a rift in the literature regarding the concept of autonomy and academic persistence of first-generation university students. The nature of the rift is one of perspective, as the majority of studies on persistence and retention are quantitatively driven, applying a one size fits all mentality (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Further, while many studies exist that explore such topics as teacher autonomy (Castle, 2006; Fumoto, 2011; Vaughn, 2013), principal autonomy (Federici, 2013; Gawlik, 2008) and developing learner or student autonomy (Booth, 2008; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996), there is a dearth in the literature concerning autonomy of first generation university students as a subgroup. Rendon (1994) advocates the need to study persistence and retention theories, such as those offered by Chickering (2010) and Tinto (1975, 1986), within specific populations who share a collective appreciation of values and beliefs or contiguous circumstances, as do first generation university students. Such an approach has the potential to further the current literature and understanding of retention theories and offer
methods of supporting students based upon shared cultural experiences (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Based upon the understanding that first generation college students constitute one third of those currently enrolled, and share in the common goal of a college degree (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rouke, 2011), while facing similar struggles of being academically underprepared (Pascarella et al., 2004; Silva Mangiante, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994) and lacking in the capital to succeed (Wells, 2010), it only seems prudent to pursue a study examining their unique lived experience with autonomy.

Exploring the nature of autonomy, as experienced by first generation college students, will serve to study such positions as the Kantian premise that humankind’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity implicitly articulates the condition of autonomy as a means to achieving one’s fullest potential (Cahn, 2009; Cronin, 2003; Wooton, 2008). This immaturity, as viewed through a Kantian lens, constitutes the internal desire to avoid challenging and difficult situations or experiencing the struggles associated with hard work (LaVaque-Manty, 2006). The autonomous journey is one abundant with failure and learning to overcome failure by putting aside the lethargic yoke of internal motivations or external influences to dictate one’s course in life (Buchner, 1904). For example, as outlined by Cahn, in order to reach the Kantian state of enlightenment, at some earlier stage in life individuals acquired the concept of resiliency as they learned to walk after repeatedly falling or failing to walk.

Similar conditions exist for students in the world of higher education, where if left unchallenged, individuals would rely upon a book to demonstrate understanding as opposed to exercising one’s own courage to use his or her reason (Kant, 1990/1785). This involves why, when, and under what circumstances students learn to voice their opinion, even should it be in the minority. As our society views the completion of a college degree as an example of fulfilling
one’s potential, via the notion of the American Dream (Bedsworth, Colby, Doctor, Bridgespan, 2006; Merrow, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2007), appreciating and furthering the understanding of autonomy in relation to degree attainment will yield positive implications when addressing rates of attrition. Consider for a moment the curricular implications of college and university instructors should they glean an understanding that student success could be established not solely in mastery of content knowledge, but rather in the purposeful design of instruction that fosters individual autonomy. This proposed study seeks to fill the gap by exploring autonomy, as experienced by first generation students, and further the discussion involving theories of student retention and persistence.

While there is a modicum of literature regarding autonomy and degree attainment, there exists quite the enumeration of articles and studies extolling the benefits of autonomy as a curative of psychological distress as experienced by students of higher education (Dalgard, Thapa, Hauff, McCubbin, & Syed, 2006; Sher-Censor, Parke, & Coltrane, 2011; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). The literature is also saturated with material that outlines the benefits of learner autonomy in producing positive results within a specific academic course setting (Clifford, 2007; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987). The literature is also replete with theories concerning student retention (Tinto, 1986, 2005), persistence (Summerskill, 1962; Tinto, 1993), and attainment (Evenbeck, & Johnson, 2012), as well as the challenges inherent with transitioning into higher education (Barefoot, 2008; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Roman, 2007). Yet, exploring the conditions and encounters of autonomy through the lens of students who persist remains underexplored and may very well be beneficial to increasing the rate at which individuals attain their academic goals. Therefore, this proposed study seeks to gain a better
understanding of the awareness and fostering of autonomy by first generation university undergraduates and its potential influence on academic persistence.

**Scope of the Study**

The scope of a study is established by considerations such as assumptions, delimitations, and limitations, which serve to fashion boundaries that inform the justification concerning decisions related to the research (Creswell, 2003). These boundaries address choices involving such topics as design, credibility, and trustworthiness.

**Assumptions**

An assumption of this proposed study is that first generation students possess the ability to act independently as well as the capacity to hold internal motivations and attitudes behind those actions. This study also assumes that each student defines those experiences in a unique manner, with shared characteristics that intersect with other students. It is assumed that an awareness of autonomy holds the key to fostering the characteristics associated with college graduates and that attaining a college degree is universally important to first year students. This study also assumes that first generation students share a common culture in that being the first person in the family to enroll in college is a significant and very personal experience (Cushman, 2006; McGlynn, 2010). Assuming the role of being the first individual within a family to attend college is a truly unique endeavor carrying the pressures and hopes of the entire family (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

**Delimitations**

At the outset, this proposed study will narrow itself to interviewing first generation college students and recent graduates from a midsized Midwestern university. The demographic
profile of this study’s population is one that draws upon the diversity associated with first
generation college students. This would include traditionally underserved students such as
women and racial minorities, who typically identify with lower socioeconomic status (Ward,
Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). However, first generation college students also include dominant
members of society whose families have not traditionally relied upon education as a means of
subsistence such as those with technical or mechanical training. The delimitation is established
as one third of current college students identify as first generation. To further define the scope of
this proposed study, students will be interviewed to explore their experiences with autonomy, as
defined by Dworkin (1988) to include the action or inaction as well as the motivations and
attitudes behind the action, and its influence, if any, on academic persistence. When defining the
boundaries of a dissertation it is important to address the delimitations of the inclusion and
exclusion of parameters, which provide shape to the study (Creswell, 2002). For example, when
studying the personal nature of autonomy, within the context of the lived experiences of first
generation university students and recent graduates, capturing the stories of each participant is
essential. Further, as the focus of the proposed study centers on the meaning established through
the experiences of each participant, the philosophical approach of phenomenology becomes a
delimitation of design under the qualitative paradigm (van Mann, 1997).

Limitations

Creswell (2003) defines study limitations in terms of potential or anticipated weaknesses
associated with the research. This proposed study follows a qualitatively driven approach to
research, which will include the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data
collection. The justification for choosing semi-structured interviews can be traced to the desire
to explore the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of the participants by covering specific
material and concurrently providing the freedom to elicit rich descriptions (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Semi-structured interviews provide for the opportunity to explore a base of understanding, without the restrictions of a structured interview. In turn, this allows the voice of each participant to experience unconstrained expression. While articulating the reasons for choosing semi-structured interviews, the very nature of this decision illuminates the inability to study participants longitudinally, which is in itself a limitation.

There also exists a concern over response bias as a legitimate limitation that must be considered (Creswell, 2007). The question of those being interviewed responding in accordance to what they actually believe is significant as it is possible that participants are answering in a manner that they feel the researcher desires. Participants could be interpreting reactions of the interviewer to answers and attempting to placate the uneasiness associated with the potential of providing a disappointing response. The very presence of the researcher, as a Ph.D. candidate, could in itself influence the response of participants. Therefore, seeking to diminish the effects of response bias, member checks will be used to improve the accuracy and credibility of the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By restating or summarizing the collected information, during the interview, as well as providing a summary of the transcribed data and findings near the end of the study will ensure the participant authenticity and correct interpretation (Moustakas, 1994).

As with most qualitative research studies, the findings and implications of this project are less concerned with generalizability or reliability, but rather focus on the nature of its transferability, credibility, and dependability via trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to the purposeful selection of participants in a qualitatively driven research design, the very nature of this proposed study is inherently limited (Creswell, 2009). For this
proposed study seven to ten participants will be utilized connected to one specific institution of higher learning, thus limiting the findings. Based upon the perspective that scholars such as Piaget and Skinner have established meaningful projects using a small number of participants, this study will employ a similar approach and also use a limited number of informants (Girogi, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This proposed study will focus on a depth of understanding with seven to ten participants as determined by the point of saturation. At this point in the proposal, this range of participants is an estimation based upon the assumptions concerning the criteria established by Morse (2000). These standards include such considerations as, the “quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, [and] the amount of useful information obtained from each participant” (p. 3).

Finally, as the instrument for data collection, the experience and expertise of the researcher will have a direct influence on the proposed study, as well as on the subjectivity inherent in the phenomenological methodology. There is a risk of researcher bias associated with conducting interviews; therefore, bracketing as a qualitative method will be employed as a means of addressing preconceived notions, thus extending the idea of objectivity (Creswell, 2005, Vagle, 2014). As subjectivity can be viewed as “a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 17), understanding its ubiquitous nature will provide the means of accounting for its influence (Peshkin, 1988). In order to further address these limitations, the researcher must constantly reflect upon internalized experiences, attitudes, and values to ensure openness and reflexivity (Flick, 2009).

Organization of the Study

Chapter two of this dissertation appraises the relevant literature associated with this proposed study. It is significant to note the breadth of topics to be covered, which include
attrition, autonomy, democracy, first generation students, and theories of retention and transition. This is an intentional act, as the researcher seeks to capture the essence of autonomy as well as the conditions that foster and require its application. Initially, literature addressing the need for this study will be reviewed in terms of statistical evidence establishing the national, institutional, and individual cost linked to college student attrition. Next, the origins and functions of autonomy will be explored, with special interest allotted to autonomy as it pertains to a democratic society and the field of education. Relevant literature concerning the significance of studying first generation college students will also be investigated to provide a basis for the importance of the research and the decision to study this unique population. Autonomy will also be explored through the lens of establishing learner autonomy, which is focused on a specific classroom setting.

Finally, as this dissertation is contextualized within the confines of higher education, theories associated with student retention will be reviewed along with the significance behind the periods of transition inherent with postsecondary education. It is noteworthy to include a discussion on cultural capital, as it is a necessary component for traversing the collegiate landscape. This study seeks to avoid the trap that places “white, middle class culture as the standard” and through the application of a social constructivism worldview (Creswell, 2007), this proposed study will include a slight critical perspective (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). To accomplish this, this proposed study recognizes the depth and wealth of culture associated with first generation students and acknowledges that this capital is undervalued by the current educational system.

Chapter three of this proposed dissertation contains a comprehensive depiction of phenomenology along with an outline of methodology, methods, and the logic of justification
underlying the research questions. This chapter also includes the rationale behind choosing a qualitative paradigm and specifically explores descriptive phenomenology as the most appropriate design for capturing the essence of autonomy as experienced by first generation university students. Chapter three also discusses the proposed research location, participant selection, methods for data collection, and methods for data analysis. During this trek, the qualifications of the researcher will be deliberated, along with concerns of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Through an exploration of relevant literature, the following chapter will illuminate a need to further explore autonomy in relation to the academic persistence of first generation university students. This need will be steeped within the literature involving autonomy (Aviram, 1993; O’Donnell, Chang, & Miller, 2013; Palfreyman, 2003; Schmenk, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Tkacik, 2008) revealing the manner in which the individual, the institution, and society (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Schneider, 2010) equally benefit from fostering the characteristics most associated with this difficult to define construct (Dworkin, 1988; Levey, 2012; Schneewind, 2005; Young, 1986). Similarly, the literature will demonstrate the negative psychosocial consequences facing college students who have failed to develop autonomous characteristics (Kitzrow, 2003; Sher-Censor, Parke, & Coltrane, 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Weber, Metha, & Nelson, 1997; Xueting, Hong, Bin, & Taisheng, 2013), and explore educational approaches to fostering these desired attributes (McNeil, 1981; Petrina, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). Literature involving student attrition (Barbatis, 2010; Braxton, 2008; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008) and retention efforts (Astin, 1985; Braxton, 2008; Tinto, 1975,1986, 1993; Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, & Tincher-Ladner, 2014) will also be investigated as will the cultural and social capital of first generation students in relation to academic persistence (Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rouke, 2011; Searts, 1997; Strayhorn, 2007). Further, literature regarding the challenges associated with transitioning into higher education will be explored as a means of validating the benefits of self-authorship in students of higher education (Barefoot, 2008).

The exploration will be philosophically (Cahn, 2009; Kant, 1965/1797, 1996/1784) and pedagogically (Brunner, 1996; Eisner, 1985; Pinar, 2012) linked to educational practices (Buchner, 1904) with an emphasis in higher education (Brookfield, 1984; Chickering, 2010) as
experienced by first generation university students (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994, 1996; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). In the end, the literature will demonstrate that characteristics of autonomy are indeed widely coveted, and even a requisite for participation in the modern democracy (Waldron, 1989), yet fostering autonomy is not viewed as a priority for the participatory nature of successfully persisting in higher education. Moreover, autonomy within a specific course or program, as in the form of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 1987), is a condition to be desired by both the student and the instructor as evidenced by the elevation of academic success (Costa & Sandars, 2012; Hauk & Isom, 2009; Zhao, 2012; Zoghi & Dehghan, 2012). Nevertheless, the wholesale commitment to fostering autonomy as a curative to the high rate of academic attrition remains largely unexplored, thus securing the prerequisite necessary to conduct this research project.

To more fully explore the connection between autonomy and the academic persistence of first generation university students (Ishitani, 2006; McGlynn, 2010; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), this proposed study will traverse the literature involving the fundamental democratic need for autonomous citizenship (White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007; Wells, 2008), and methods for establishing autonomy through educational activities (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schmenk B. 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). In the end, the literature will reveal a need to extend the understanding of autonomy as experienced by first generation university students and demonstrate that retention models are only applicable to autonomous students who possess the ability to self-direct his or her navigation through the transitional periods of higher education.
The first section of the literature review explores data concerning rates of academic persistence as well as the cost associated with student attrition in relation to the nation (Waldron, 1989; Dodson, 1997), the institution (Schneider, 2012), and the individual (Choy, 2001). The cost of student attrition is a complex issue facing institutions across the nation requiring an equally multifaceted approach to its remedy (Countryman & Zinck, 2013; Willcoxon, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). Next, the review delves into the literature surrounding autonomy along with its myriad of conceptions as derived from such scholars as Dworkin (1988), Kant (1785/1965), Rawls (1990), and Raz (1986), among others. This section seeks to illuminate central characteristics of autonomy, and identifies the one conception, as advanced by Dworkin (1988), that incorporates both the freedom to act as well as the act itself.

It is also within this section where fostering autonomous characteristics becomes clear in terms of serving the symbiotic needs of both the individual and society within the confines of a functioning democracy (Heyneman, 2003; McAvoy, 2013; Plato, trans. 1935; Thorpe, 2010). This section further provides a glimpse into the U.S. education system where the focus is not always on developing the individual to meet his or her fullest potential though the educational process, but rather focuses on measurable outcomes (Bruner, 1996; Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Pinar, 2012). In this section recent studies involving teacher autonomy (Castle, 2006; Fumoto, 2011; Vaughn, 2013), principal autonomy (Federici, 2013; Gawlik, 2008) and developing learner or student autonomy (Booth, 2008; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996) are also considered as they illuminate an absence in the literature concerning studies of autonomy regarding first generation university students.

Section two explores the literature associated with first-generation college students and illuminates the need to study this group as a unique subset of the college student population
(Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This section reviews specific characteristics of first-generation students as well as the unique barriers these students face in the quest for a college degree (McGlynn, 2011; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Wells, 2008). Finally, studies such as McKinney and Novak (2013) are reviewed discussing the capital utilized by first-generation students and calls into question whether a greater sense of autonomy could potentially influence academic persistence.

The third section of the review explores autonomy as a function within the learning environment in terms of the pedagogical conception learner autonomy (Ciekanski, 2007; Bandura, 1997; Lee, 2008; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996 Pintrich, & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan, & Deci, 1987, 2000; Zoghi, & Dehghan, 2012; Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman & Bandura, 2000) and personal autonomy (Darwall, 2006; Holec, 1981; Schinkel, 2010; Winch, 2005; Young, 1986). This section also explores curricular means for establishing autonomy as well as the psychological distress experienced by students of higher education who demonstrate a lack of autonomy (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benson, 2003; Kitzrow, 2003; Dohney, 2010; Gray, 2010; Glottlieb, 2011; Rice, Richardson, Clark, 2012; Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012).

The fourth and final section explores student persistence with special attention paid to Tinto’s (1975, 1986, 1993) Model of Institutional Departure. This section also reviews literature that discusses the transitional periods of development associated with students of higher education (Barefoot, 2008; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011; Ritchhart, 2002) and explores previous research into college student retention (Brown, 2012; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Windham et al., 2014). In the end, this proposed study is founded upon the literature and seeks to extend the current understanding of autonomy and its potential influence on student persistence.
The literature review was conducted through the use of multiple tools beginning with the Ball State University Library’s *One-Search*, which served to broaden the necessary exposure to the phenomena of autonomy and persistence of first-generation college students. Next *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses* was utilized to review relevant research that provided direction for the study in relation to recent examinations. Dissertations were reviewed involving student attrition and retention efforts between the date ranges of 2005 to 2014 and utilized as foundational resources. The reason for this date range was to ensure that the most recent studies concerning retention where reviewed, thus contextualizing the problem of attrition. Dissertations involving autonomy were also reviewed; however, due to the nature of this ancient construct ranges where not used.

In order to identify scholarly, peer-reviewed articles and publications, specific databases were accessed such as JSTOR, Academic Premiere, Educational Resource Information Center (Eric), and EBSCOhost. General search terms were initially used such as “Autonomy”, “Student Autonomy”, “Learner Autonomy”, “Democracy”, “College Student”, “College Student Retention”, and “First Generation College Student” as a means for identifying relevant scholarship. This process yielded over 64 scholarly articles and publications that served to inform the intended study. A refined search was conducted within these databases using more focused terminology to include, “Self-Authorship”, “Self-Directed Learning”, “Self-Regulation”, “Liberal Autonomy”, “Democratic Autonomy”, “College for All”, “Academic Persistence” and “College Student Distress”. This search yielded an additional 32 sources.

It also became necessary to review statistical data regarding the current state of affairs within American higher education. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statics (NCES) and *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS) were
accessed to provide meaningful data to support the claims of this intended study. Search words such as “Retention”, “Persistence”, and “First-Generation Students” were utilized to secure all relevant data. The Pell Institute and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development were also accessed to provide additional data that served to provide support for the problem of academic attrition.

Due to the nature and scope of literature involving autonomy and American college students, the Ball State University Library card catalog was accessed to provide the necessary depth and breadth to inform the study through traditional books. Significant contributors to the evolution of autonomy were reviewed such as Dworkin (1988), Kant (1996/1784, 1990/1785), Plato (trans. 1935), Rawls (1999), Raz (1986), among others, which contributed 15 books for review. Texts concerning college student development, college student health, and college student retention from such scholars as Astin (1975), Barefoot (2008), Chickering (2010), McGlynn (2011), Summerskill (1962), Tinto (1993), and Ward et al. (2012) were also reviewed, which provided 8 books for review. Additionally, textbooks from such educational scholars as Bruner (1996), Darling Hammond (2010), Doll (1993), Eisner (1979), Fine (1991), and Fisher (1961) were reviewed and contributed 6 books that served as reference for the proposed study.

Academic Attrition

In 2014, with a political and a societal emphasis placed upon increasing degree attainment in the United States (Casey, 2011; Evenbeck & Johnson, 2012; Schneider, 2010), over 21 million students were enrolled in a degree-seeking program (NCES, 2014). Of these students less than 40% will realize a college degree within four years, and 59% will do so in six years (IPED, 2014). According to Engle and Tinto (2008) while it is true that the U.S. is a world leader in college participation, in terms of enrollment, “the nation ranks in the bottom half in terms of degree completion” (p. 5). The reasons behind these departures are as diverse as the students themselves (Countryman & Zinck, 2013; Braxton, 2008), and the costs associated with such high percentages of dropouts are significant, affecting not only individuals (Barefoot, 2008) and institutions (Schneider, 2012), but also the welfare of society (Barbatis, 2010).

Siegel (2011) acknowledges the myriad of reasons behind student departure and advocates that everyone within the institution has a responsibility to combat student attrition. Clark and Cundiff (2011) would agree and like Siegel, they advance the notion that institutions must assume a proactive stance when looking to address this problem through academic and social programming. In a recent study by Turner and Thompson (2014) establishing effective academic and social programs require a focus on the specific student population being targeted for support. For example, students who identify as millennial require interaction and academic support based in modern technologies, while this was not true of pervious generations. Understanding the motivations behind departure should be as proactive as the programming.
itself. Willcoxson et al. (2011) acknowledge that institutions are in a fight for survival against student attrition and demonstrate that factors influencing departure are not static, but rather evolve from year to year and vary according to institutional demographics. Windham et al. (2014) also consider attrition to be of paramount importance particularly within community colleges where nearly three quarters of all students fail to persist.

While students from across the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic spectrum may choose to leave college prematurely, there exist certain subgroups that deserve further exploration, as they choose to leave in exceedingly high numbers (Ward et. al, 2012). Within the student dropout population, Engle and Tinto report, “Low-income, first-generation students were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year” (p. 2) when compared to second generation, middle and upper income students. Accordingly, Pike and Kuh (2005) suggest that first year students play a significant role when considering student attrition, as they comprise the greatest percentage of students who fail to persist and thus steer the conversation.

Studies such as those conducted by Countryman and Zinck (2013) and Willcoxson et al. (2011) illustrate the need to further explore the cost of attrition with a special emphasis on the first year of enrollment. These studies recognize the need to explore the experiences of students in relation to the highs and lows associated with the first year of postsecondary education. Similarly, Turner and Thompson (2014) advance the concept that the first year is the most vital year when considering college student attrition. Each of these studies advance the concept, as presented by Astin (1975, 1985, 1999) and Tinto (1975, 1986), that institutions would do well to work proactively through both social and academic programming throughout the life span of the student, but maintain an emphasis on students during the first year. While these studies explore a variety of variables contributing to the rise in student attrition, Willcoxson et al. advocate the
need for additional research of a qualitative nature as a means for eliciting “critical attrition factors that lead individuals to withdraw before completing their degrees” (p. 349).

**Cost of Academic Attrition to the Nation**

Wild and Ebbers (2003) have established the importance of institutional retention efforts that serve to combat college student attrition, as the costs associated with premature student departure affects a wide array of stakeholders. To view the problem from a top down paradigm, consider for a moment that the United States no longer exists in isolation, but rather in appreciation of open borders and technological advances, the U.S. exists within a “global knowledge economy” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 6). This new perspective, of living in the knowledge age, focuses on the ability to create, organize, and transfer information at a speed never before imagined (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The onus of learning in a globally complex and fluid society is upon the ability to collaborate, cooperate, and communicate across great distances in order to remain economically competitive (Mayers, 2003; Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010). This new paradigm of competition affects more than the individual, as the economic stability of the nation is also at stake.

Engle and Tinto (2008) insist that it would, therefore, serve the national interests of the United States to ensure that a greater percentage of students not only enroll in college, but also persist to graduation. From a highly pragmatic view, college educated adults earn significantly more income, thus contribute an equally significant amount of tax revenue that serve to fund national, state, and local programs (Bedsworth, Colby, Doctor, & Bridgespan, 2006). Other examples illustrating the benefits of earning a college degree, which contributes to the health of the nation include: 42% of college graduates volunteer their time; 80% of those with a college degree voted in 2012, thus indicating a higher percent of democratic participation; 2% of college
graduate households participate in Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Programs, thus indicating greater financial strength; and those with a college degree are less likely to smoke or become obese opting instead for a healthier lifestyle (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). These examples illuminate a portion of the mutual benefits for advancing not only greater college enrollment, but also college completion.

**Cost of Academic Attrition to the Institution**

Next consider the effects of college student attrition on the institution of higher learning itself. Roman (2007) directly states, “retention and…student enrollments…can be translated into amounts of revenue” (p. 20) received and utilized by the institution. This revenue moves beyond tuition and fees, as significant as that may be, and encapsulates a melody of revenue streams ranging from housing and dinning to recreation, textbooks, and supplies, all of which collectively support the workforce necessary to sustain the campus environment (Riseman, 2013; Wild & Ebbers, 2003). According to Riseman, the losses due to college student attrition, not only affect the institution immediately through the forfeiture of short-term revenue on a semester basis, but also in the long-term budgetary restraints through the loss of sustained revenue over the course of many years of enrollment. For example, this proposed study seeks to explore the experiences of first generation students at a midsized Midwest public university. For this university the average amount per academic year, per new student, in tuition, fees, textbooks and supplies, and room and board equals $18,804. Next, calculate this figure over the course of the average college student life span, which is five years to completion, and the figure balloons to $94,020 in revenue. As illustrated, one student has the potential to either positively or negatively affect the revenue of a university, which influences the budget of the institution.
To more fully demonstrate the point, consider the data presented by the same institution to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) in 2013. The institution reported that in the 2006 – 2007 academic year 3,482 first-time full-time students enrolled, representing a revenue stream of approximately $327,377,640 over the course of five years (3,482 students x the five year expected revenue $94,020). Of these new enrollees, collectively 35.12% graduated within four years (1,223), 20.53% did so in five years (715), and 4.07% graduated within six years (142). That equates to 2,080 students graduating in six years or less, leaving 1,402 or 40.26% of students failing to achieve the goal of a college degree. Even with a graduation rate of 60% the potential disruption of the revenue stream is the tens of millions. While this is to be used as an illustrative point, Riseman (2013) would advocate that these disruptions to the budgetary process present additional obstacles to an institution that is already facing challenges inherent to the world of public higher education. He would insist that of the 1,669 institutions he has studied, they have “collectively lost revenue due to attrition in an amount close to $16.5 billion” (p. 3). While it is true that students who depart can be replaced that also comes with a cost as the average amount spent on student recruitment is estimated at $5,460 per student. Of course, Riseman notes that student attrition costs the institution more than simply streams of revenue; it has the potential to cost the institution prestige as well as the ability to attract new students.

Cost of Academic Attrition to the Individual

The OECD (2014b) report established the importance of education as a means of becoming more competitive in the labor market citing distinct advantages to those who hold higher levels of education. For example, across all OECD countries those with a tertiary level of education experienced over 80% rate of employment, while those with without post-secondary
education experience only 60% rate of employment. Looking into U.S. statistics, Baum, Ma, and Payea, (2013) demonstrate that those with a bachelor’s degree enjoy a median income of “$56,500, [which is] $21,100 more than the median earnings of high school graduates” (p. 5).

Engle and Tinto (2008) echo these advantages in citing that college graduates are likely to earn “$1 million more over their working lives than will those who only receive a high school diploma” (p. 5). They would go on to state that the benefits of a college degree might represent the only viable option for low-income individuals to “overcome their current economic circumstances” (p. 5). Social mobility is also shaped by the level of education as illustrated by Baum, Ma, and Payea in that 31% of individuals earning a college degree were able advance to the top bracket of their income quintile compared to only 12% of individuals with a high school diploma.

A college degree represents more than mere economic advantages for many students of higher education. Admittedly, earning a college degree is the first step to self-sufficiency (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but it also provides the training necessary to complete rigorous tasks over the course of many years. This experience translates into the ability to successfully navigate the complexities of modern life in the form of social, political, and cultural issues (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McGlynn, 2010). To many students, a college degree represents the opportunity to be included in a society that values the credentials associated with a college education, as the degree remains a significant aspect to attaining the American dream.

President Obama (as cited in Schneider, 2010) describes American higher education as failing to live up to the expectations of preparing its citizens for the “global marketplace” (p. 6). He discusses how in ten years the U.S. has “fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young
people with college degrees” (p. 6), and emphasizes the manner in which this hurts both the individual and the nation. In this, the concept of human capital becomes central, as society extols the benefits of a college education, yet fails to adequately support the endeavor of all individuals from enrollment to graduation. In actuality, while access to higher education continues to grow, equality “remains elusive for low-income and first generation students” (Engle & Tinto, 2008), p. 5). In fact, Engle and Tinto depict a scenario where students from high-income families are “six times more likely” (p. 5) to graduate college that those students from low-income families. This is alarming in light of the OECD (2014a) report, which demonstrates that only 30% of American adults outpaced the level of education attained by their parents. This supports the rhetoric that while college may be accessible for everyone fewer students are persisting to completion, and in particular fewer students from low-income families. Of further concern, the same report shows that children of parents who did not finish high school and are between the ages of 25 to 34, a meager one in 20 hold a college degree. A conclusion can be drawn that as children see their parents fail to attain higher levels of education, their internal motivation to outpace that level decreases as well.

Schneider (2012) discusses the concept that America outspends the rest of the world on higher education and extends the conversation to conclude, “success is not commensurate with these world-class expenditures” (p. 2). This becomes even more apparent when considering first generation students who face significant risk factors that serve to impede their academic experience (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As noted by Schneider even with investing nearly $2 billion annually in federal dollars, specifically on first year students, these efforts remain largely unsuccessful as over 30% of those students fail to return for their second year. When looking at this objectively, first generation students are three times more likely to not return for their second
year at a public institution and five times more likely to leave a private institution. According to Engle and Tinto as well as Schneider, these institutions are much more selective as they enroll students who are both academically and socially able to withstand the transition into higher education. Statistics such as these are alarming, providing the necessary motivation to further explore the experiences of first-generation college students, and speculate on conditions that may serve to lessen this growing problem.

From the literature, student attrition is a significant problem facing not only the student, but also the institution as well as society (Countryman & Zinck, 2013; Braxton, 2008). In a study conducted by Engstrom & Tinto (2008), they conclude that the very real problem of student attrition is not addressed simply through an increase of student access and then hoping for the best. Rather, with a concerted effort between administration and faculty, student persistence can be influenced when institutions believe “that all students, not just some, have the ability to succeed under the right set of conditions” (p. 50). With the financial and societal implications associated with student attrition combined with the call for more qualitative studies (Willcoxson et al, 2011; Tinto, 1993), student attrition remains a focus for this proposed study.

**Autonomy and Academic Success**

One such condition lies in the benefits of fostering an autonomous student. The ancients, whether Plato (trans. 1935), Aristotle (as cited in Pérez & Ziemke, 2007), or Descartes (as cited in Schneewind, 2005) expressed the foundational need for members of society to develop a sense of autonomy, which serves to protect and prepare them for the harsh realities of life. Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) is considered by many to be a champion of developing autonomy and discusses the aims of authentic education as a means for this development by the awakening of students to “ripe individual thinking” (p. 24). This notion of individual thinking embodies the
development of the individual’s psychological immunity, which according to Kindlon (2001) is the capacity to reach unpopular conclusions and withstand the criticism of others, thus promoting a fully developed individual. Raz (1986) contends that the ability to self-author one’s life is essential to achieving his or her fullest, most rich potential. As such, autonomy for the purpose of this dissertation study utilizes Dworkin’s (1988) concept in that it embraces both the actions taken by an individual as well as the attitudes and motivations behind those actions. Contextualized within higher education, this version of autonomy increases the potential for students to achieve their desire for a college degree.

The correlation between autonomy and successful learning is not a new concept. In actuality, the literature is quite robust with examples of how an autonomous learner is more able to manage the stress associated with the educational process (Dalgard et al., 2006; Sher-Censor et al., 2011). It is also replete with theories of self-efficacy, which is an attribute of autonomy established through self-regulated learning and has been identified as a significant consideration for addressing student success in the classroom setting (Pintrich, 2000; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Still others champion the idea of self-determined active participation as a hallmark for individual success, fulfillment, and wellbeing (Buchner, 1904; Ryan & Deci, 1987, 2000; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). Studies illustrate the ways in which learner autonomy within the classroom setting boosts student performance, leaving this dissertation to question whether or not it is possible to view autonomy as a potential curative to the devastating tide of college attrition.

**Visions of Autonomy**

Autonomy is a unique socially constructed notion that enjoys a myriad of applications, which serve to expand the breadth of humanity. With its august beginnings rooted in the majesty
of ancient Greece (McNeill, 2011), to the consideration of Kant’s “moral ought” (Schneewind, 2005, p. 3) of the 18th Century, to the modern liberal understanding of relevance “as a governing value in liberal democracies today” (Levey, 2012, p. 103), autonomy continues to inhabit human discourse. The term itself conjures a variety of meanings, as the individual engages a philosophical lens through which to view and ultimately delineate its meaning. Young (1986) advances the idea that attempting to pigeonhole such a fluid term is problematic as within one discussion it can simultaneously be held to a narrow interpretation such as described by Kant (1996/1784) and then universally discussed in terms of the sovereignty of a nation.

Perhaps Dworkin (1988) is most accurate when he succinctly states, “what is more likely is that there is no single conception of autonomy but rather that we have one concept and many conceptions of autonomy” (p. 9). This is evidenced by the articulation of multiple forms of autonomy, some of which include “cultural, functional…and legislative” (Tkacik, 2008, p. 369).

As a foundation for this research study, autonomy will be contextualized through a discussion of academic persistence of first generation university students and what, if any, influence it could have on their academic experiences. The term autonomy itself will be defined in terms viewed by Dworkin, which include both the action or inaction taken by an individual as well as the internal motivations or attitudes behind that action. Autonomy evokes a variety of meaning and is most often considered the capacity to direct one’s own course in life, free of coercion, in the exercise of self-direction and self regulation (Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand, Bouffard, 2013; Dodson, 1997; Kant, 1784/1996; Kekes, 2011; Pintrich, & DeGroot, 1990).

It is significant to note that while the term autonomy remains ubiquitous in many sectors of society, in regards to this proposed study where the emphasis is on academic persistence, autonomy will incorporate both “the choices people make and the significance and value of their
making those choices in accordance with their own standards and preferences” (Dworkin, 1988, p.ix). Recognizing that first generation students of higher education act according to either internal or external forces reveals only a portion of the intended exploration of their experiences with the construct of autonomy. In order to truly engage with the principles that serve to foster the development of autonomous students, the discussion must explore the underlying motivations, values, and attitudes of those students.

**Defining Autonomy**

When considering the implications of addressing the social construct of autonomy, one must look to the past at the progression of its evolution. Autonomy has a history of ambiguous and inconsistent application. As Dworkin (1988) previously demonstrated autonomy exists in a multitude of conditions within an endless realm of applications. Schneewind (1998) moves the conversation further by advancing the notion that understanding autonomy begins with an appreciation of the context in which this phenomenon is experienced. From a philosophical approach, autonomy is most often associated with the idea of choice through the exercise of one’s free will. In this view, autonomy is a function whereby the individual sets for him or herself a course of action predicated upon the motivation to act (Buchner, 1904). Suffice it to say, autonomy is a construct that is best explored through the lived experiences of those who wield it within a defined context.

There exist a variety of diverging applications of autonomy to include Goldstein’s (1978) version of the law providing man’s freedom, Scanlon’s (1972) view of the sovereignty of decision making according to beliefs, Wolf’s (1970) view where man is autonomous when not subject to the will of another, and Feinberg’s (1973) view where autonomy is implied if the individual rules himself. Paula McAvoy, (2013), turns the lens onto the modern world when she
states that living within the context of a contemporary liberal state, the ability to acquire “the skills and disposition to make well-informed choices about how to govern one’s life is essential” (p. 483). In this sense, we begin to understand that autonomy has multiple levels through which one must evaluate the structures of this unique and socially constructed phenomenon. To understand the autonomous journey of first-generation college students, it must be explored through their lived experiences. Before that can be accomplished, a brief review is in order.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, humankind has endeavored to understand his or her place in the reality of the world in which he or she lives. The comprehension of that reality is founded upon the experiences associated with held beliefs, values, and actions, as well as the motivations and freedoms behind those activities, culminating in a meaning making process (Meziro, 1990). Such considerations can be evaluated by the conscious act of reflecting upon those experiences and then using that interpretation as a guide for choosing an action, as individuals create their own reality through choice. To be a conscious being is to be a free being (Sartre, 1943/1992), and the freedom to choose is connected to the philosophical significance associated with the Age of Enlightenment. In this view, humankind emerges from the constraints of his or her self-sustained immaturity and exercises the capacity and courage to choose a direction for him or herself according to the enlightenment mantra of thinking for oneself (Kant, 1784/1996). This understanding is significant in light of the proposed study, which seeks to better understand autonomy, the freedom and courage to act as one sees fit, through the lived experiences of first generation university students.

While there exists many variations and applications of autonomy, certain characteristics and attributes have become universally accepted such as the capacity and ability to direct one’s own passage in life free of coercion (Dworkin, 1988; Dodson, 1997; Kekes, 2011). Autonomy,
according to Dworkin, is a “term of art” (p. 6) representing characteristics that are universally coveted such as authenticity, originality, and creativity. Be that as it may, dissent thrives and can even flourish within any philosophical branch of thought concerning such an elusive concept. Ruminate on liberal autonomy for a moment. In this philosophical vein, autonomy holds a pluralistic value where some scholars such as Christman (2009) and Frankfurt (1988) view autonomy through an intrapersonal posture of judicious inquiry in the form of proceduralists. Still others focus on social conditions regarding the actual choices reached by individuals in the form of substantivists (Levey, 2012; Raz, 1986). Indeed, it becomes clear that the very act of defining autonomy remains thought provoking at best, and therefore, must be approached with an open mind. Perhaps Dworkin (1988) was correct in his thinking that while the singular notion of autonomy is ensconced within innumerable perceptions, it is the context of understanding that matters most.

Raz (1986) contends that self-direction and the ability to exercise “authorship” (p. 370) over ones life is an indispensable aspect to his or her well-being. The autonomous person will lead a more robust life, simply by exercising control over his or her destiny. Bruner (1996) seems to appreciate the idea of self-authorship as he discusses the purpose of education in terms of enabling “individual human beings to operate at their fullest potential” (p. 67), through the equipment of both skills and the understanding of how best to apply those skills. This understanding captures the essence of the Latin phrase know thyself in that to fully engage, as an individual, one must first understand that he or she possesses the ability or capacity to wholly act (Wilkins, 1917). This is significant and moves the discussion beyond either an action based upon duty or function and embraces the reflective process inherent to fully act.
According to Schinkel (2010) liberal theory concerning autonomy, in particular autonomy-promoting education as espoused earlier by Bruner (1996), can be grounded in three defensible ways; “it is in the interest of the collective (society, the state); it is in the interest of the individual; and autonomy is intrinsically valuable” (p. 99). Eisner and Vallance (1974) would agree with this concept in that they advocate the notion of a self-actualization curriculum where students learn personal fulfillment through the discovery of skills that serve to enrich society. Rawls (1999) demonstrates that the ability to pursue one’s individual interpretation of the good must be enhanced by others through educational activities that promote the vision of human rights. As this proposed study seeks to explore the lived experiences of first-generation American college students, let us first investigate the rudimentary need to foster autonomy as a foundation of a participatory democracy.

**Autonomy within Democracy**

Of the vastness of species found within the animal kingdom, human beings are unique, as they require nurturing, correction, and instruction in the aspiration of realizing the purpose of their existence (Cahn, 2009). Such an endeavor can only be fulfilled through the art of education, which must envision the rising potential of a future society. That potential is irrevocably linked to a society of individuals capable of acting as autonomous agents, who have embraced the idea of living in a civil union via Locke’s social contract (Waldron, 1989; Dodson, 1997). Mill (1859 / 1985) is in agreement in that a modern democratic republic relies upon the freedom of each citizen to utilize his or her faculties to contribute to the needs of the government.

Concurrently, these self-governing agents, espoused by Locke’s social contract, must abandon the predisposition of wild lawlessness, and seek to collectively govern under the
premise of rational beings existing with equal freedoms (Dodson, 1991). It is this consciousness of freedom that constitutes the essence of being human in that the individual can question and reason for him or herself imagining the possibilities of a future yet unrealized (Sartre, 1966). This freedom also incorporates the capacity to choose, the power to act as one sees fit in the form of autonomy (Kant, 1797/1965), which allows individuals to unify and participate in a judicial democratic society. Accordingly, freedom is to be viewed as a preeminent possession of humankind, and as such, essential to understanding what it means to be human (Hegel, 1821). By this, the individual embraces a theory where the human spirit is viewed as freedom itself, which encompasses self-actualization, as a means of reaching one’s fullest potential (Cahn, 2009).

A manifestation of the potential behind autonomous citizenship can be viewed through the democratic approach to governance. Functioning to its fullest potential, a democracy requires the active participation of an educated and autonomous population, engaged through a shared system of laws, values, and principles, in what Lucas Thorpe (2010) labels a “substantial composite” (p. 461). To effectively achieve the necessary level of education for such participation, it is important to develop the humanity of each individual in the precepts of reason. It is the essential burden of education to instill an inclination and aptitude for scholarship that emphasizes a curiosity for learning (Hoffer, 1973). As such, it is necessary to reign in the animalistic propensity of indulging in the individualistic impulse of each citizen through the mastery of one’s desires and wants (Dodson, 1997). As a means of efficaciously addressing this issue in its totality, this intervention must occur at an early age to preclude the existence of what Immanuel Kant would term as savagery (as cited in Cahn, 2009). Further, in order to facilitate the requisites of the democratic judicial society continued discipline taking the form of formal
education would be a necessity when addressing the emotional and intellectual developmental needs of the population (Beach, 2007; Heyneman, 2003; Oder, 2005). In a modern democratic state, autonomy rests upon the need for society to develop practical, critical thinkers.

The question concerning the importance or significance of a population consisting of autonomous citizens of a modern democracy, who exercise authentic and creative thinking, begs to be addressed. Perhaps the oldest view could be considered through the educational philosophies of Plato, who extolled the merits of the search for self-knowledge, the ability to reason, and the form of value (Brumbaugh, 2009). For Plato (trans. 1935), the benefits of education serve the best interest of the individual as well as society, in that happiness is the result of self-realization. Happiness is interrelated to the ability to comprehend one’s capacity to achieve his or her fullest potential. In this pursuit a connection clearly exists between the ideals of Bruner (1996), Eisner (1985), Rawls (1999) and Raz (1986) to the theories of the ancients. Plato argues that the only way individuals can truly perceive the real world is not through their human senses, but rather, through an intellectual understanding. This is the foundation for Bruner’s appreciation of the process of learning where the individual possesses both the understanding and the capacity to manipulate that understanding. The modern democratic state demands citizens who not only understand that they hold a participatory role, but the appreciation that the chosen role can take shape as they see fit.

Plato (trans. 1935) continues with the idea that a good society is one that emphasizes the intellectual development of its citizens and that a prosperous citizen is one who serves the needs of the community, knowing that education is a lifeline. It is Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) who advocates that the “ideal worth and beauty of a free humanity” (p. 24) is based upon the awakening of individual thought. Is this not the base sentiment of a modern liberal democracy
where self-fulfillment serves to enrich society (Eisner & Vallance, 1979) and self-knowledge contributes to equality (Dworkin, 1978)? Thomas Aquinas (as cited in Fisher, 1961) advocates that freedom, to an ideal state, is a fundamental right and this liberty provides a means for each member to reach his or her fullest potential in conjunction with the potential of the state. Again, Kant ascribes value to a democratic education by its very nature as a “positive constructive force in human character” (p. 28). The modern democracy, now more than ever, needs individuals willing to take these concepts to heart, and lead others in a time of increasing inequality, strife, and discord.

Johnston (1994) considers the difference between what is conceptualized as individual autonomy and collective autonomy in relation to need. The former engages the idea that an individual simply chooses what matters most to him or her, while the latter incorporates the concept that individuals reach conclusions based upon a collective concern for other rational beings. In the late 18th Century, it would be Kant (1797/1964) who strongly suggested the notion that humans are self-governing and exercise a level of autonomy, which is informed by a by a sense of duty. This internal law requires a reciprocation of action in the fulfillment of a sustainable existence. A democratic society exists wherein the individual exercises his or her individuality as a distinct member of the collective. As such, both the individual and the collective society benefit most when each entity experiences a compulsion to serve the other. The motivations for achieving this level of autonomy are rooted in the necessity of reigning in the animalistic propensity of indulgence found within each citizen and instead seeking to serve the needs of the community (Cahn, 2009).

According to Carlisle (2010), the central tenet of fostering autonomy lies in the development of individual morality in seeing the needs of others in conjunction with the needs of
oneself. In this, there exists a unique connectedness between the individual, an independent human being with an innate sense of worth, and value to the community. For example, Locke (as cited in Yolton, 1970) would suggest that education must provide the character formation inherent to the transition of an individual who is becoming a responsible citizen within society. Again, the connection between the needs of individual and those of society that serve to promote the requirements of a functioning state, are established.

Consider for a moment American society with its perfunctory dependence upon each unique, well-informed individual citizen. Regardless of political positioning, each individual in the great American experiment shares in the civic responsibility of ensuring the perpetuation of the nation (Dewey, 1939). Many citizens believe that they are dispensing their civic obligations through the autonomous act of voting; however, this is far from accurate. They are acting out in this manner because they have been led to believe a rather simplistic view of the truth and have not exercised autonomous thought behind the process. The principle measure in fulfilling one’s duty involves the acceptance that the “legitimacy of government is found in the individual” and requires more than a simple act (White, Scotter, Hartoonian & Davis, 2007, p. 228). The perpetuation of the democratic way of life is contingent upon individuals demonstrating a willingness to make rational choices through reflections of an independent exploration of ideas, thus embracing both the action and the motivations behind that action as a means of autonomy.

Ideally, this concept evolved through the Enlightenment period with the escalation of “individual rights and personal virtue” as the driving force for the establishment of government (White et al., 2007, p. 228). With this comprehension the concept that individuals agree to live together emerges, under the protection of expressed laws, as each individual fulfills his or her responsibility to the community through his or her autonomous actions (Thorpe, 2010). These
communities form the basis of society through expressed norms, ideals, and beliefs and as “effective life in a community was understood to be a necessary part of civilized living” (Cahn, 2009, p.103).

Kant (1797/1964), would advance the notion that autonomy is the ability of rational beings to prescribe their own actions by means of reason. It is a “metaphysical psychology” that advocates a philosophy of each person possessing a “compass of human reason” (Schneewind, 2005, p. 515). Schneewind described how Kant’s autonomy “presupposes that we are rational agents”, directed by reason that informs “our awareness of a categorical obligation”, which allows us to resist the “pull of desire” (p. 515). He further asserts that “autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature” and the good of any society is to promote and foster this virtue (Kant, 1785, p. 43). Through a study of Kant’s pedagogy, we can conclude that education itself is in fact a personal realization of internal dignity (Giesinger, 2012). As Kant holds that every individual inherently possesses dignity by virtue of being human, and that the most basic strength of a child is to realize this dignity, one must conclude that children ought to be exposed to an education that strives to foster an awareness of “dignity [which] is tantamount to the development of moral autonomy” (p. 12). The link between education, citizenship, and autonomy is well established and the study of autonomy in relation to academic persistence is therefore significant.

The educational enterprise will, by design, promote what Acar (2011) discusses as a form of social cohesion, which magnifies specific elements such as tolerance, “authentic individuality” (p. 460), and mutual respect. Any citizen, who lacks in this organic exchange, will most certainly fail at fulfilling the obligation of monitoring the actions of the government, and thus, fail to guard against a potentially corrupt system. Again, the connection between
education, characteristics of autonomy, and society are established.

Raz (1988) espoused the advantages of autonomy as a means for citizens to cope with evolving technologies and the fluidity associated with both “economic and social conditions” (p. 370) of the modern age. Fostering autonomy provides the flexibility of the individual to adapt and circumvent challenging situations that could otherwise preclude them from active participation. In this modern age, it has become essential for individuals to learn to adapt to alternating situations as society has become enveloped with change. According to Trilling and Fadel (2009) in 1991 an extraordinary event occurred in that the world witnessed the passing of the Industrial Age and the dawning of the Knowledge Age. It would appear that for the first time in human history, more resources were expended on the creation, organization, and transfer of information than applied to industrial goods. The transformation of the global economy rapidly increased, revealing a need to prepare individuals who can successfully and collaboratively engage within an evolving society (Rosefsky-Saavedra & Opfer 2012).

Existing in this new age ought not present obstacles to the individual’s ability to serve the needs of society. In fact, through the increased level of communication, political leaders would in reality have the means to more effectively communicate those needs. However, Brighouse (2000) challenges the notion that those in power would hold the interests of the individual above their own, which speaks to the belief that the needs of the few in actuality may outweigh the needs of the many. Who then should be responsible for the fulfillment of the individual, if not the individual? Here we see how “Constitutional Pluralism” (p. 73) can be seen to support for individual autonomy as it is the individual who will better understand his or her unique characteristics and thus possess the capacity to apply them in their own pursuits. In short, Brighouse would inspire an understanding that the individual should be presented with the
opportunity to decide his or her best course of action and then continue in the freedom of that pursuit. This is echoed by countless scholars who insist that reaching one’s full potential is predicated upon the ability to self-direct one’s course in life (Dworkin, 1988; Kant, 1797/1964; Rawls, 1999; Raz, 1986).

A Critique of Personal Autonomy

Individual autonomy, as discussed thus far from a humanist perspective, is not without its share of critics. For example viewed through a poststructuralist perspective power and agency are examined in relation to individuals assuming multiple identities within individual discourses (Davies, 1991). As such, Davies contends that individuals “are multiple rather than unitary beings” (p. 42) with innate desires that are based upon the lived discourses. The poststructuralist perspective lies in opposition to the humanist viewpoint of agency, as it is shaped by traditionally held structures of bias in terms of capital, race, and sex. As stated by Young (1986), “our conception of ourselves” (p. 19) is the foundation upon which an individual is capable of self-authoring.

The very nature of autonomy is socially centered, as evidenced when viewing the freedoms of the individual living in poverty, which are more restrictive than the freedoms of the individual living in middle class America (Feinberg, 1978). The manner in which one views him or herself, as shaped through social interaction, determines how the individual exercises the liberal theory to “seek their welfare as they see fit” (Weberman, 1997, p. 206). This becomes an issue of power, as not only is it possible to influence the ability to act, but also the very internal desires to act have the potential to be influenced through indoctrination. Hinchman (1996) advances the idea that viewing oneself “outside of all power / knowledge complexes” is in reality a misleading concept based in the imagination of the socially constructed individual. According
to Foucault (as cited in Wain, 1998) personal autonomy must be viewed with the understanding that its cultivation is the byproduct of system of power perpetuating itself. Therefore, it is suggested that personal autonomy is construct of control and not a source of freedom as advanced by my autonomy scholars.

According to Taylor (2005) personal autonomy “celebrates creative self-authorship and encourages those virtues…integrity and authenticity…that support it” (p. 602). Yet, autonomy also embodies “statuses, entitlements, immunities, liberties” that are based upon assumptions of each individual and mandate the manner in which he or she is to be treated (Anderson, 2013, p. 355). Anderson contends, “autonomy is not something one is born having” (p. 357) instead it is a normative status one achieves after developing autonomous capacities. This new status elevates one’s social capacity to make decisions regarding the treatment of oneself as well as others. In this viewpoint, an understanding of autonomy must be positioned in such a way that accounts for the interpersonal relationships and influences of social norms that serve to influence the individual’s development of self (Donchin, 2000).

While in a broad sense personal autonomy conjures sentiments of individuality, it does not exist in isolation. In reality, individual autonomy within the US “involves a dynamic balance among interdependent people who are engaged in overlapping projects” (Donchin, 2000, p. 191). This aspect is both liberating and concurrently constricting. The liberation occurs as the individual reaches a decision based upon his or her own conclusion (Dworkin, 1988). The constriction occurs as these independent people have an obligation to one another to exert power over an individual’s will in order to prevent harm to that individual or others (Young, 1986). This equates to the “justifiability of restricting an individual’s autonomy…[which] is the province of paternalism (p. 63). This should bring to mind the axiom that one must not scream
“fire” in a crowded theater, as the individual autonomy of the actor represents a public harm to the community (Rawls, 1999). This speaks to the collaborative aspect of autonomy as described by Donchin (2000) where a “social conception” (p. 192) of autonomy allows for the mutual respect of individual freedoms and works to balance “power relations equitably” (p. 193).

**Autonomy Through Education**

With the understanding that a democratic society functions best when populated with individuals who have achieved the fullest potential possible, through the exercise of individual thought, it is necessary to explore autonomy through the education of the individual. Kant postulated that a rational society must discipline its youth through education, to satiate the need for its continuance (Buchner, 1904). Failure to adequately prepare youth for the challenges of adulthood through the cultivation of creative and articulate instruction dispels Kant’s sentiment and condemns society to the inevitable skid into obscurity (Zhao, 2012).

In Castle’s (2006) phenomenological study the researcher recognizes the autonomous nature of education, through pedagogical research as a means for making the educational activity more effective. The emphasis is not on learning strategies or techniques, rather the impetus is on “understanding children’s / students’ understanding” (p. 1101). One of the primary themes to emerge from this study is the concept of teaching as an autonomous act. When teachers are presented with the “intellectual and moral autonomy” (p. 1096) to make decisions that best fit the need of the student, effective instruction occurs. In this, “autonomous teachers know why they do what they do with children and can justify their teaching” (p. 1096). Similar themes appeared in Fumoto’s (2011) phenomenological study where preschool teachers were given the freedom to direct learning activities based upon the needs and interest of preschoolers. This study magnified the benefits of professional autonomy as a means of informing the manner in which teachers
form relationships with learners. These positive teacher-child relationships then translate into learning activities that enhance the development of self-confidence and self-regulation for students during the early years of development.

The current educational system has the potential to either foster individual creativity through the development of autonomy or reduces that very sense of individuality. Raz (1986) advances the idea that the autonomous person will lead a more robust life, simply by exercising control over his or her destiny. Likewise, in a phenomenological study by Vaughn (2013) the researcher explores the need for adaptability in educators as they seek to incorporate the interests and essentials of each student. This adaptability provides individualized avenues for students to develop in the areas of his or her greatest need. Bruner (1996) describes the very purpose of education as enabling “individual human beings to operate at their fullest potential” (p. 67), through fostering the skills as well as the understanding of how best to apply those skills.

Bruner’s (1996) sentiment is also linked to teacher autonomy, as offered by Vaughn and Faircloth (2011) where teachers with a vision as well as the freedom to follow that vision, through agency, are more effective instructors. In that sense, educators who have been equipped to teach and exercise the agency to do so, experience greater fulfillment and success in both the professional and personal arenas of life. As discussed previously, Schinkel (2010) extols the liberal theory supporting autonomy, in particular autonomy-promoting education, as it intrinsically holds value in support of the needs of the individual as well as society. Educational scholars would agree as evidenced by Eisner and Vallance (1974) insisting that students learn personal fulfillment through the discovery of skills that serve to enrich society.

A similar sentiment is captured in a study of principal autonomy where the power to influence the school, through curriculum or setting performance standards, is an important
measure of autonomy (Gawlik, 2008). In this, the inference is that students experience fulfillment through the exercise of skills that enrich society, just as principals experience validation as they exercise “a very valuable organizational resource- their autonomy” (p. 800). Further, as far back as 350 BC Plato (trans 1945) advocates for the educated individual to resist becoming intoxicated by knowledge, and instead return to serve the needs of society, as is his or her obligation. The very ability to pursue one’s individual interpretation of the good, according to Rawls (1999), is to be enriched through educational activities that promote the collective good. Again, there exists a connection between the individual interpretation of the good with the concept of autonomy in that the individual must choose for him or herself its’ meaning. In a study by Federici (2013), the autonomy and self-efficacy of principals to perform their duties, as perceived by the individual, positively correlated to job satisfaction and fulfillment. Equally significant, the study indicated that principals who experience a lack of autonomy report lower job satisfaction and higher rates of burnout.

Booth (2008) discusses empirical research that depicts the need for an expanding knowledge society to develop students, in this instance students of engineering, who authentically meet the demands of such an evolving society. He insists that students “learn to find their own way through the maze of knowledge…text-books…problems and make their own sense of it in an autonomous fashion” (p. 387). The impetus on learning is that students assume an active role in self-determining what and how knowledge is to be applied in the 21st century.

When considering education in the 21st Century it may be better to consider it as an age of the “relationship revolution”, as opposed to the widely held notion of the “information revolution” (Schrage, 2001, p. 1). By this, the strength of the learning activity is no longer simply limited to the access of basic units of information as in times past; but rather, learners are
now provided with the opportunity to develop relationships, via technology, through direct access to other individuals themselves (Brown & Adler, 2008). This form of active learning, as espoused by Strudler (2010), allows for student engagement and must be championed by educators for “initiating and sustaining…efforts to integrate technology” (p. 226). Schrage advocates that the true transformative property of technology is centered on the ease at which individuals communicate with one another, as well as with organizations found within society. Bonk (2009) furthers this sentiment by extolling the benefits of how individuals “can now communicate and learn from one another in a matter of seconds” (p. 7), as this period is perhaps the “most monumental…since [the age of] Plato” (p. 9). This new era of learning has opened the world to “quench our thirsts for knowledge” (p. 12), as the teacher is truly no longer the source of information. This links back to the arguments of Booth, in that autonomous students need not be restricted to a static source of knowledge such as a teacher; but rather, the student must exercise the self-direction to find whatever information will best address the problem at hand.

Through the advances in technology and with the understanding that humanity exists in a relationship rich society, students of the 21st Century live in a participatory culture, where individuals actively engage in the world around them with the intention of improving society (Jenkins, 2006). The active participation of all citizens has become a collective concern, and preparing students for this role, as future adult citizens, is of paramount importance. In order for students to truly engage, beyond their internal propensity to indulge in the pleasures of these technologies, it would behoove educators to align the educational enterprise in such a way that promotes autonomous and creative thought that is motivated by the desire to serve the community. The inability to meet these criteria is the basis of rejecting the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education, and thus denying students the “opportunity to become full participants in
our society” (Mores, 2004, p. 267). In this there exists an educational obligation to prepare all students to reach his or her fullest potential as salient members of society capable of meeting the demands of both the individual and the community. Brown and Adler (2008) bolster this position in that “if populations are to thrive in the foreseeable future they will increasingly depend on the availability of robust local ecosystems of resources” (p. 17) that cherish creativity and innovation. This sentiment is directly related to the need for society to have authentic, creative, and innovative individuals who can both generate and provide for the distribution of such resources.

According to Eisner (1985), the “quality of school curricula and the quality of teaching are the two most important features of any educational enterprise” (p. 1). However, as with any organic social activity, there remain influences and forces that serve to shape and define the endeavor. Apple (2008) states that classroom actions and activities undertaken by educators are influenced by both “ethical and political” (p. 25) considerations, which are portrayed throughout society. Specifically, the decisions made by educators inherently involve the organic complexities of the type and value of knowledge, as well as who decides what and how that knowledge should be delivered. Pinar (2012) goes further in stating that the educational environment has become “a screen onto which national crises...[are] projected” (p. 181), thus transforming the function of education into a reactionary tool to address societal woes. He would further propose the notion that teachers, themselves, have been transformed into the instigators of these calamities. Such events as the launch of Sputnik in 1957 (Wissehr, Concannon, & Barrow, 2011), the literacy crisis of the 1970’s (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), and the economic challenges of the 1980’s (Pinar), have left teachers facing increased scrutiny with a
catastrophic silencing of voice and loss of an active role in shaping the educational process (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Eisner, 2000; Goldmann, 2007).

Accusatory language plagues modern media implicating public schools as failing to address the needs of students and, consequently failing the needs of society. It is being argued, by Apple (2007), that these attacks on education are actually attacks on “egalitarian norms and values” (p. 195), and when combined with the renewed interest of high stakes testing constitutes a “re-stratification” (p. 207) of cultural and social capital. This occurs as educational rhetoric challenges the place of public schools, and thus the social mobility that is attached to achievement for disadvantaged students who lack greater access (Lauen, 2008). Such attacks serve to disrupt the meaning and purpose of education, ultimately redefining the mission as “public nostalgia for the past” ignites social anxiety over such obscure factors as test scores (Eisner, 2000, p. 351).

Wenger (1998) describes education as a process that while formative has the capacity to transform learners moving the discussion beyond the learned attribute of knowledge. Bruner (1971, 1983) emphasizes an approach to understanding the applicability of knowledge, which provides the student with flexibility that is not limited by a simple outcome. Over his course of influence, which continues today, Bruner (1996) refined his vision of teaching and learning to incorporate the communicative nature of the educational process. The onus of education is not a simple transfer of content knowledge; rather, as identified by Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) it is the self-activity where students are taught how to think.

As discussed earlier, Bruner (1996) advocates the purpose of education as a means for developing individuals to function at his or her fullest level in service to society. This view is nearly synonymous with certain theories expounding the concept of personal or individual
autonomy. For example, Raz (1986) contends that self-direction and the ability to exercise “authorship” (p. 370) over one’s life is an indispensable aspect to his or her well being. The insinuation is that the autonomous person will lead a more robust life, simply by exercising control over his or her future. In the end, whether from an individual or social perspective, education that fosters autonomous and creative citizens endures to enrich opportunities available to all members of society (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

This sentiment has become increasingly challenging as Pinar (2012) discusses how educational activities have become marginalized in the U.S. due to a continued anti-intellectualism agenda relegating teachers to mere technicians as opposed to masters of their craft. Further, educators have increasingly become a convenient target of an accountability system where the focus is on measurable outcomes as opposed to student learning (Slattery, 2013). Pinar describes aspects of teaching that once embraced the intellectual freedoms of teacher preparation emphasizing “individuality…originality, creativity” (p. 183) and that used to enhance the learning process, have been compromised diminishing the anthem of academic freedom. These are the very attributes that are equated to characteristics associated with autonomy, and coveted by all (Raz, 1986). Educators must once again aspire to appreciate the nuance and subtly of education, by engaging in a form of “educational connoisseurship” (Eisner, 1985, p. 219) that serves to prepare students for the role that awaits them in adulthood.

Unfortunately, there is not a simple solution. As Short (2008) insists, policy decisions have been relegated to the federal level as in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and fail to address the needs of a diverse student population, thus failing to “achieve its purpose” (p. 422). Educators have been reduced to mere technicians, faithfully feeding the prescribed content to students who will then be tested on their objective knowledge of the material (Hursh, 2005).
Lankshear and Knobel (2011) argue that this new emphasis occurred as a means of disrupting the vision of professionalism for teachers and Pinar (2012) articulates that this agenda is serving to further the anti-intellectualism educational shift by disenfranchising educators.

The educational system has thus been relegated to one of competition, where schools compete for funding based upon the outcomes of high stakes testing (Lauen, 2008). While the educational rhetoric remains focused on higher standards, the subversive truth is that it implies the need for high stakes measurement (Eisner, 2000). Pinar stresses that educators are being “forced to abandon their intellectual freedoms to choose what they teach, how they teach, and how they assess student learning” (p. 182). He insists that society has been deluded into believing “the commonsensical argument…[of] all that matters is the bottom line – scores on standardized tests” (p. 181), thus completing the educational shift in America to one based on a business model. Kohn (2010) describes how a “national test creates a de facto national curriculum, particularly if high stakes are attached” (p. 2). This emphasis does little to foster autonomous attributes that will serve the needs of both the individual and society.

If student achievement is now determined by the outcomes of standardized test scores that also measure teacher performance (Pinar, 2012), yet remain localized to filling in the oval for either A, B, C, or D, then the very foundations of an educational system that fosters original thinking has been eviscerated (Hursh, 2005). Nichols (2007) discusses how the true educational outcome of student learning remains inconclusive when discussing high stakes testing. Further, the pressure to do well on high stakes standardized evaluations continues to erode the confidence of both teachers and students. Under this “New Taylorism” style of education, where teachers are forced to utilize a factory model approach similar to that as discussed by Bobbitt, where prescriptive teaching methods are leading to the deskilling of teachers and the sanctioning of
creativity in students (Au, 2011). Such focus on standardization, has led to diminished autonomy of both educators and their students. While this effect may harm the success of second or third generation college students, it has the potential to drastically reduce the success of first generation students.

**First Generation Students**

When considering the rates associated with college attrition, the rise of significance behind studying first generation students within the literature is quickly elevating them into a unique subpopulation, fully deserving of an equally distinctive place in the research (McGlynn, 2011; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Wells, 2008). Pike and Kuh (2005) consider first generation students as deserving of a unique position in the literature, as this sub-population is responsible for “lower persistence and graduation rates” (p. 277), which significantly influence the status of the institution.

The prevalent view found within the available literature discussing first generation students is that of a deficit model of thinking; however, this model is applicable in light of the reality that these students enter the institution burdened with the weight of expectations from past family generations, they are largely academically underprepared, and they lack the experience and knowledge regarding the complexities of higher education (Mehta et al., 2011; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004). Admittedly, these students bring a wealth of knowledge unique to each individual, yet, these strengths remain undervalued in the traditional system of education (Yosso, 2005). For example, the institution fails to acknowledge the aspirational capital of these students as they carry the “hopes and dreams” (p. 77) for a better future as first generation students, thus strengthening their resolve to persist in the face of adversity. This form of capital
is interrelated with the home-based capital of many first generation students where parents often champion education as a means for disrupting the poverty cycle (Choy, 2001).

With the dramatic increase of access to the world of higher education over the past two decades (Engle & Tinto, 2012; Padgett et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2012) as well as the access to subsidized funding such as the Pell Grant (Schneider, 2010) the composition of students on the American college campus has evolved (Pascarella et al., 2004). Add the educational anthem that every student must attend college (Casey, 2011; Martinez, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2007) and President Obama’s commitment that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (as cited in Schneider, 2010, p. 3) and the emphasis on expanding those with a college degree becomes nearly tangible. Truly, where the once affluent euro-centered traditional student dominated classrooms in America, institutions of higher learning have expanded in terms of the depth and richness of learners. With this new population of students, there also exists a new realm of barriers to success as well as the cultural and social capital necessary to academically persist.

By and large, studies associated with first generation college students revolve around three central concepts (Terenzini et al., 1994; Terenzini et al., 1996). The first concept focuses on the similarities and differences of demographics and academic preparedness between first generation students and all others as discussed by Horn and Nunez (2000). The second explores the transitional period as experienced by first generation students between secondary and postsecondary education and considers the social and cultural capital of first generation students (Rendon, 1994; Rendon et al., 2000). Finally, the third focus examines the concept of academic attainment, which provides compelling evidence that first generation college students are much more likely to dropout of college when compared to second generation students (Barefoot, 2008;
Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). To establish a more holistic view of first generation college students, portions of each of the above mentioned concepts will be explored in this review of the literature.

It’s important to recall that the rate of student attrition for first generation college students is significantly higher than that of other students (Ishitani, 2006; Ward et al., 2012). Equally important to recall is that while access to higher education continues to grow, the United States remains at the bottom portion of all industrialized nations when it comes to college completion (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Tucker (2014) emphasizes a meaningful shift occurred from 1980 to 2011 in that overall college student enrollment rose by 73% and minority student enrollment increased by nearly 300%. This shift is significant as a high percentage of first generation college students identify as being a member of an underrepresented population (Pascarella et al., 2004). During this time period only 10% of lower income students realized their goal of a college degree and “approximately 57% of first-time students seeking a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent” completed their course of study (McGlynn, 2011, p. 35). Engle and Tinto as well as Schneider (2010), among others, would insist that greater access alone does not translate into greater educational achievement or equality, as many are led to believe.

Darling-Hammond (2010) discusses this issue through an educational system unable to overcome the inequalities of poverty, school funding, and ineffective learning environments. Horn and Nunez (2000) along with Ward et al. (2012) cite these very circumstances as contributing factors to the rising tide of student attrition by first generation students. Recognizing the importance of educational access, Sadovnik (2007) communicates the significance in the role that school plays in a modern society “especially with regard to the equality of opportunity for all citizens” (p. 5). This opportunity is now being touted by political
and educational leaders in the form of increased access to education, when in reality this is not a mark of equality as low income and minority first generation students are 3 to 6 times more likely to drop out (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Society must guard against the urge to assign value to a system that promotes access as a means of distributing social capital, but fails to deliver equality.

This speaks to the concepts promoted by Welner and Carter (2013) where societal opportunities are limited by the perpetuation of ideas based upon the inequalities of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and ideology. In order for this to become a fully robust discussion on equality, one must consider the gaps that exist in opportunity and not simply focus on the gaps that exist in the form of achievement. Failing to address these opportunity gaps can be equated to restraining opportunities for everyone to become a “full participant in our society” (Morse, 2004). For example, Fine (1991) describes the “fragile” (p. 162) relationship between many low-income mothers and schools who often feel “ashamed of their own inadequate schooling” (p. 162) and lack the social capital to promote their child’s educational endeavors.

Darling-Hammond (2010) envisions an educational system that accounts for the whole child in that each student participates in such basic provisions as nutrition, healthcare, and stability. Rothstein (2013) clearly outlines the disadvantages facing first generation students of lower socioeconomic families, which range from lack of health care to environmental exposure that contributes to physical and behavioral detriments. On average, poor families move more often than their middle class counterparts, thus disrupting the educational experience. This aligns with the findings of Horn and Nunez (2000) and Rendon (1994), in that academic preparation plays a significant role in student academic persistence in higher education. Rothstein further considers the lack of options and thus choice, involving access to venues of
entertainment, culture, and a diverse learning environment, which speaks to the level of social
and cultural capital experienced by many first generation students (Choy, 2001; Rendon et al.,
2000). Further dividing the gap between the haves and the have-nots are the educational
conditions of the physical schools as well as the funding assigned to those schools (Li, 2005).
These conditions severely limit not only academic outcomes, as demonstrated in the constant if
not expanding, achievement gap, but it also erodes the capability of the individual to exercise
authorship over the direction of his or her life. It would be difficult, while not impossible, to
imagine first generation students facing these socioeconomic challenges and still possess the
attitude of self-authorship, much less the action of choosing one’s course in life.

First Generation Demographics

As evidenced by the current literature, first-generation college students typically consist
of lower income, underrepresented members of society who are more likely to enroll in two-year
public institutions (Hottiger & Rose, 2006). Many of these students are non-traditional, tend to
live off campus, hold jobs, and endure familial pressure to provide, while others represent the
traditional view of students fresh out of high school (Pascarella et al., 2004). Just as the concept
of autonomy is a challenging notion to settle, definitively defining first generation college
students, as one subset, can be equally challenging. While the above characteristics are typical
of first generation college students, it is not unusual to have students from middle and even upper
SES brackets identify as first generation (Ward et al., 2012). The real significance and bonding
characteristic of first generation college students is that they are the first members of their family
to enroll in college. This is by no means a trivial aspect, as Phinney, Dennis and Osorio (2006)
and Ward et al. demonstrate that many first generation college students face a unique burden of
carrying the hope of an entire family upon his or her shoulders. In this, first generation students
are undeniably connected, and merit a place in the scholarship as a unique population (Rendon, 1994).

It is noteworthy, at this point in the review, to acknowledge the need to provide consideration to the population of first generation college students in terms of race and ethnicity. Truly, within this unique group of individuals lies a labyrinth of diversity and rich heritage that serves to influence the lived experiences of the individual regarding both the educational journey and the development of autonomy. In reality, through the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT), one would possess the essential framework to critically examine these lived experiences and begin to truly understand the struggles of these students within the world of higher education (Trevino, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). Ladson-Billing (1998) discusses that CRT first appeared as an outcropping of frustration “over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (p. 10) in the 1970s and describes the manner in which racial inequalities remain prevalent in higher education today. CRT scrutinizes race and racism in relation to the inequalities that exist between the dominant and marginalized groups within society (Omi & Winant, 1994). And while first generation college students, as a subgroup, may experience marginalization due to their lack of capital (Wells, 2008), distinct individuals within the subgroup have experienced advantages and disadvantages based upon such factors as race and privilege. CRT can provide a lens that explores these advantages and disadvantages through an understanding that discrimination is an integral facet of everyday life in America, especially in the institutional setting of education, where the dominant white European culture dictates the preferred form of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005).

Yet, as this population is comprised of unique individuals, they remain interconnected by commonalities regarding personal, social, and institutional barriers that serve to frustrate their
academic endeavors (Raisman, 2013). Representing nearly 5 million students enrolled across the country today, only 11% will earn their desired degree when “compared to 55 percent of their more advantaged peers” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). Schneider (2010) insists that nearly 30% of all students fail to persist beyond their second academic semester, while first-generation students experience significantly higher rates of attrition (Ishitani, 2006). When considering those who enrolled in college directly after high school, Choy (2001) demonstrated that 82% of children whose parents graduated college enrolled, while 54% of children whose parents graduated high school enrolled and only 36% of children did so whose parents did not graduate high school. Whether it’s Austin (1985) or Terenzin et al. (1994), among others, studies support the notion that college enrollment directly after high school plays a significant factor in student success.

In an attempt to classify first-generation college students, it becomes obvious that the discussion must initially begin with an understanding of the characteristics and demographics of the modern day student in a more general sense. Accordingly, Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, and DuPont (2009) describe the current student population as one quite different than the population found in times past with nearly half of all students working 20 or more hours per week at four year institutions and just over 60% doing so at two-year institutions. Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013) report that “82% of high school graduates from families with income above $90,500…enrolled in college” (p. 34), while 65% of those from families earning $34,060 to $55,253 (middle income) enrolled, and 52% enrolled from families earning less than $18,300 (lower income). Of these statistics, within one year of graduation 70% of white high school graduates enrolled in college, 66% of black students enrolled, and 62% of Hispanic high school graduates enrolled (p. 35). From a gender perspective, 73% of female high school graduates enrolled and 64% of male high school graduates enrolled within one year of graduation (p. 36).
Note that these figures, as stated in the report, include the terminology of black students. For the purpose of this dissertation, it should be taken as representative of an inclusive expression representing students with family origins of both African heritage as well as those of the Caribbean Islands, and could easily be transferred to “people of color” (McGlynn, 2011, p. 9). The terminology “students of color” refers to all non-white students, which includes blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, et al. That is, all students who do not benefit from white privilege.

**Barriers to Education**

With roughly one third of all undergraduate students in the United States identifying as first-generation, who are nearly six times more likely to dropout (Engle & Tinto, 2008), this subpopulation deserves careful examination. First-generation college students enter the realm of higher education with a range of disadvantages in relation to second and third generation students (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001), which begin with a lack of knowledge over application requirements as well as the overall enrollment process (Drozd, 2008; Stolle-McAllister, 2011). However, these concerns are simply the beginning of struggles as noted by Tucker (2014), who recognizes that a majority of first generation college students are associated “with low-income, minority or children of immigrants” (p. 24), thus further removing would-be students from a position of understanding the fundamentals of college procedures and expectations. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), only 23% of students from the lowest economic quartile graduated college within six years of enrollment when compared to 95% of those within the top economic quartile. Certainly the choice of institution plays a factor in these statistics, as those institutions with more rigorous admission policies tend to graduate significantly higher rates of students with
supplemental programming designed to engage the student both socially and academically (McGlynn, 2011).

Looking further into the social and institutional barriers of educational access, low-income families tend to rely upon each family member to contribute to the financial stability of the home, thus limiting the time necessary to engage in the learning community (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First generation students are more likely to align their individual identities to their level of employment due to need, as compared to second-generation students who are more likely to identify themselves as students first (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Roman (2007) reports that due to these economic considerations, many first generation students must delay enrollment beyond the graduation of high school and yet continue to “struggle to balance work, family and school” (p. 20) once enrolled. First generation students also face personal barriers to academic attainment in the form of peer associations where attitudes toward educational goals, when compared to those of their peer group, do not often align (Drozd, 2008).

Academic preparedness also plays a crucial factor when discussing the success of first generation college students, as many students enter postsecondary education requiring remedial assistance, which serves to prolong enrollment and exhaust resources (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Roman, 2007). Further complicating the discussion is the rigor associated with the high school experience of first-generation college students, as children of parents who did not attend college are less likely to have taken such college preparatory courses as advanced mathematics, college level reading, or foreign language (Stolle-McAllister, 2011; Rendon, 1994; Woosley, & Shepler, 2011). These same students are also less likely to perform well on college entrance examinations, or even fail to take them altogether (Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2007).

**Social and Cultural Capital**
Ward et al. (2012) consider first generation college students to be the “invisible minority” (p. 14) on many college campuses, lacking the necessary support structures to successfully navigate the college experience. Because of this status, first generation college students require careful consideration as a unique subset of the college student population (Wells, 2008). In order to study their experiences more authentically, recognizing this group in terms of a marginalized, special population due to their lack of cultural capital in comparison to their traditional counterparts (Woosley, & Shepler, 2011), is an essential component for a meaningful discourse. However, to more carefully frame the discussion around cultural capital this study is referring to the capital needed to traverse higher education, with its focus on a hierarchical system. In this sense institutional knowledge that would otherwise be available to second or third generation college students becomes a deficit for first generation students (Terenzini et al., 1994). This distinction is significant, as first generation students possess and utilize many different forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), which may not be valued by the educational system with the emphasis on 4-year degrees (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Yosso describes these forms as embodying a cultural wealth paradigm that manifests itself through such forms of capital as aspirational, familial, and navigational, among others.

Bourdieu (1986) provides the framework through which to view first generation college students in terms of possessing “economic capital…cultural capital…social capital” (p. 47), all of which influence the positioning of individuals within society, especially within the field of education. In very basic terms, economic capital is the accessible or convertible wealth of the family, cultural capital explores the continuity between the family and the dominant culture within society in relation to the application of knowledge, and social capital involves the connections and social networks of the family (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). The hope of many first
generation college students is that they might experience a sense of cultural mobility after graduation, thus adding to the social and cultural capital of not only the individual student, but of the entire family also (Drozd, 2008). The difficulty is that these students generally possess lower aspirations and lower levels of efficacy when contextualized within the traditional education paradigm (Yosso, 2005) compared to their counterparts, as they feel marginalized and often report feeling like an imposter (Ward et al., 2012).

In short, first generation students, and their families, lack the necessary capital to compete in a society designed to reproduce itself through the structures of education, employment, and access to services (Strayhorn, 2007). Consider for a moment the simple fact that second generation college students, benefit greatly from the first hand knowledge and experience of their parents who have successfully navigated the complex systems inherent to higher education. Pascarella et al. (2004) effectively notes, “first generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education” (p. 250) and fail to appreciate such themes as aspiration and resiliency, which as noted by Yosso (2000) represents the cultural wealth of many first generation college students. Drozd (2008) goes further in discussing not only the explicit expectation that children of college educated parents will attend an institution of higher learning, but that it is an unequivocal expectation that they will complete the intended course of study. In a study conducted by Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rouke (2011), they “paint a very precarious picture for first generation students in that they enter college less prepared to succeed” (n.p.). The report also outlines the deficit experienced by first generation college students simply because they were not exposed to parents who successfully completed college.
What then is to be done to move beyond mere recognition of the struggles associated with first-generation college students and on toward a solution? Eisner and Vallance (1974) promote the concept that individual fulfillment occurs through an educational approach that strives to enrich the learner through the discovery of personal talents and skills. The educational enterprise, therefore, can be viewed through an orientation of self-actualization, which serves as a means of advancing society through the personal fulfillment of the individual. However, the current system appears to be biased toward those with the necessary capital required to traverse the terrain and marginalizes those who are traditionally underserved (Roman, 2007); thus not supporting the individual fulfillment, but rather reproducing the oppressive nature of society.

Fisher (1961) discusses the views held by Plato in that education is the most important agency of the government with the capacity to shape a harmonious society. Plato (trans. 1935) himself would advocate that a good society is one that is intellectually based. Therefore, those within the field of education who possess the capacity to change the system, must endeavor to “overcome the false consciousness” that serves to equate educational equality with increased access, and dare to dream of “what ought to be” (Greene, 1995, p. 61). While increased access to education is a worthy goal, it is only the tip of the problem when addressing equality and degree attainment for first generation students, many who lack the capital to see the problem much less possess the resources to combat it. First generation students who lack social and cultural capital are unlikely to see that they are in jeopardy of failing and even less likely to seek support services to address the problem.

Irrefutably, cultural capital, as viewed by the current educational system with a bias toward the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), is a necessary component for traversing the collegiate landscape; however, this study seeks to avoid the trap that places “white,
middle class culture as the standard” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Acknowledging the unique position of individual first generation college students, within the collective, will be addressed in the methodological section, chapter three. In brief, each voice will convey the rich expressions, struggles, and victories as experienced by the unique individual and provide a robust, more accurate picture of first-generation college students.

**Autonomy in Education**

Dworkin’s (1988) sentiments are distinctly revealed in the field of education where autonomy supports a unique position encompassing such conceptions as *learner autonomy* (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987, 2000; Zoghi & Dehghan, 2012) and the development of *personal* or *individual autonomy* (Darwall, 2006; Schinkel, 2010; Winch, 2005). These often educationally based conceptions are embedded in the pedagogical approach that supports cognitive development, which is then reinforced through behavior that stimulates the motivation to act (Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman & Bandura, 2000). It is this behavior, which according to Bandura (1997) is based upon the individual’s efficacy expectation involving whether or not the individual believes that he or she is capable of self-directing. In this approach, students become active participants in the educational process developing strategies of effective learning (Mayer, 2003).

According to Hussey and Smith (2010) “One of the most important transitions in higher education is that from a passive learner who is dependent on the direction and motivation of others to an autonomous student” (p. 157). This transition moves the learner from a position of following directions to one where he or she becomes the motivational force behind the learning activity. Students become active participants in learning, driving the experience beyond traditionally held conceptions of the teacher-centered approach. Through the development of
autonomy learning becomes a holistic process (Jonassen et al., 1994), accounting for the human aspect of education where the focus is not on outcomes, but rather on the journey itself (Eisner, 1985).

Hussey and Smith (2010) further discuss the transition to autonomy in education as a process where students are provided opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills needed to fuel the self-guided educational endeavor of a college degree. They elaborate in that a student possesses autonomy when they not only have the skills, but also the “self-confidence and motivation to exercise these attributes” (p. 157), and that this occurs through the efforts of the educator. McGlynn (2011) also insists that the educational endeavor, especially on the postsecondary level, is in the hands of the instructor, as effective teaching will “prepare students to be able to achieve” (p. 47). She elaborates her position in discussing the importance of cultivating an engaging atmosphere that encourages active participation. Candy (1991) supports this position in the development of learners who continue to learn beyond the context of the classroom. Active learning strategies as discussed by Zimmerman (1989) encourage self-regulation and self-efficacy leading to learner autonomy (Mayer, 2003), which is correlated to “cognitive engagement and academic performance in the classroom” (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990, p. 37).

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is certainly not a new concept, having experienced wide application throughout the world of academia (Schmenk, 2005). Unlike the ambiguity associated with the construct of autonomy, learner autonomy has a specific function addressing the individual’s capacity to assume ownership over the educational activity within the context of a classroom or course. The roots of this functional form of autonomy can be traced back to the early 1970’s to
the Language Center at the University of Nancy in France (Smith, 2008). It is most often associated with langue learning activities, but has since branched out to wider applications in education to nearly every content area. Holec (1981) is considered by most to be the first to connect learner with autonomy as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). He reached this definition through a philosophical and pedagogical enhancement of an earlier educationally based definition of autonomy as offered by B. Schwartz (1977) where the individual is accountable for his or her activities. Holec insists that learner autonomy centers on an academic pursuit with a functional understanding that the individual in question possess the “capability of taking charge of his [or her] learning and nothing more” (p. 3). In a very base sense, learner autonomy is a pedagogical notion where the learner develops the capacity to direct his or her actions and assume responsibility for those actions.

Dworkin (1988) speaks of autonomy as a theory and practice that can be adapted for educational endeavors. He advocates for the development of individuals capable of making independent life choices through self-regulation, reason, and reflection, which is also reflected in the philosophies of Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904). These attributes are essential when discussing the freedoms associated with learner autonomy (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987, 2000). This conception of autonomy incorporates the student driven intrinsic motivation of self-directed learning in a specific course of study, through the exercise of choice in topic, activity, and assessment (Morse, 1997). This self-authorship encompasses a learner who is capable of directing his or her learning activity as well as utilizing an educational structure, like that found within a constructivist classroom, where “control can be exercised by the learner” (Holec, 1981, p. 7). Petrina (1992) describes the gains of utilizing this approach to education as a means of ensuring a holistic advancement of the learner with a high capacity for
becoming “self-actualizing, autonomous, authentic” (p. 38). Holec would agree and advocate for the idea that learner autonomy is made manifest when the learner demonstrates the purposefully developed capacity to assume responsibility of the learning activity and then also has the potential to exercise that level of control within a learning structure.

Zimmerman (2000) demonstrates the cognitive aspect of utilizing a pedagogical approach that supports self-regulation through the exercise of self-directed learning activities. In this process, students evolve from the passive position of simply receiving information, to an active role of creating knowledge (Mayer, 2003). An educational endeavor that incorporates these process driven aspects serves to “celebrate creative self-authorship and encourages the development of those virtues…integrity and authenticity” (Taylor, 2005, p. 602). Recall, that these virtues are synonymous with the characteristics of autonomy and connect autonomy to life beyond the classroom (Raz, 1986). This form of autonomy involves more than simply remaining free of educational restraint imposed by the instructor; rather, it is the ability to “author one’s world…to shape and direct one’s life” (Young, 1986, p. 109). Autonomy offers the individual an inherent sense of freedom or liberty as ascribed by Mill (as cited in Cahn, 2009), but it also provides the capacity to achieve future accomplishments.

As described by Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) learner autonomy incorporates the freedoms of self-directed learning in a specific course or classroom setting, through the exercise of choice in topic, activity, and assessment. Personal or individual autonomy, these terms are often used interchangeably, as defined in a liberal notion “celebrates creative self-authorship and encourages the development of those virtues…integrity and authenticity” for the furtherance of society (Taylor, 2005, p. 602). While both accentuate self-control as a requisite for developing autonomy, learner autonomy is relegated to one setting and personal autonomy moves beyond
that setting into the public arena. While there exists a plethora of research on the benefits of learner autonomy in an academic course setting (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Clifford, 2007), the literature is quiet on individual autonomy and academic success in terms of degree attainment.

**Learner Autonomy in Higher Education**

Garcia and Pintrich (1996) acknowledge, “intrinsic motivation [to learn] is greater among children whose parents’ and teachers’ styles of interaction are autonomy supportive” (p. 447). They elaborate upon this idea by expressing the connection between a less restrictive environment, where learners transform into active participants, with the capacity to master content knowledge. This modality moves beyond regurgitating facts and figures for the sake of an exam, and elevates the learning to a position where the student recognizes the benefit of the material beyond the exam. This conception mirrors the scholarship of Ryan and Deci (1987, 2000) where motivation is a critical aspect of the learning activity as a motivated student engages in self-directed behavior that expands his or her knowledge. This conveyance from an external need to pass an exam to an internalization of assuming ownership of learning fosters autonomy (Ryan, 1995).

Students who experience both the *freedom* to choose and the *opportunity* to self-direct learning activities exhibit a more robust understanding and application of the material (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Similarly, this line of thinking is congruent with that of Holec (1981) who advocates for both a freedom of choice and a framework or structure that provides the student with opportunities to act as inherent principles of learner autonomy. The significance of Garcia and Pintrich’s (1996) study of college learner autonomy, contextualized in a classroom setting, involves the first time learner autonomy is explored on the postsecondary level. Their study
served to extend the literature regarding factors of autonomy that influence college student classroom success such as “value, efficacy, and anxiety” (p. 478). Further, the approach utilized by the researchers served to inform the approach taken in this proposed study in that the perceptions and experiences of the participants hold the greatest value when exploring the “phenomenological…[nature] of autonomy” (p. 478).

The study revealed an interesting facet, that while appearing superficially negligible, it serves to ground this proposed dissertation. Garcia and Pintrich (1996) purport that learner autonomy within a college classroom may not necessarily yield immediate positive results. In fact, improved academic performance in the form of “high course grades” (p. 484), may not materialize during the span of the academic semester. Nevertheless, a classroom environment that is facilitated by an autonomy-promoting instructor “does seem to modestly foster intrinsic goal orientation, task value, and self-efficacy” (p. 484), which translates into a student who demonstrates “greater interest in the material, and greater persistence in the face of difficulty” (p. 484). This indicates that autonomy within the confines of a singular course has the potential to positively influence the overall development and persistence of college students beyond the course.

Raz (1986) contends that the idea of personal autonomy provides for the wellbeing of the individual through the freedom to choose his or her personal goals and the decision on how best to pursue those goals. In this case, Raz holds that it is not the specific objectives themselves that constitute an autonomous agent, but rather the method through which he or she “evaluates, adopts, and pursues them” (as cited in Taylor, 2005, p. 605). Perhaps it may be easier to view autonomy by means of the sovereignty and validity of the desires that induce one to act in the first place to wit, such desires could also be viewed as ethics, emotions, values and so forth. As
such, Raz considers the process of deliberation to be the primary component when discussing personal autonomy and not merely the outcome.

Autonomy remains a highly contested and ubiquitous term when discussing the complexities associated with the world of humanity. Dworkin (1988) reflectively and philosophically considers the implications of this social construct, insisting that in incorporates both “the choices people make and the significance and value of their making those choices in accordance with their own standards and preferences” (p. ix). This bifurcation explores the action or inaction as well as the internal motivates that drive the decisions to act or not.

**Establishing Autonomy**

According to educational scholar Brookfield (1984), in order to make the learning endeavor meaningful, students must assume greater control in evaluating their needs and understanding the context through which they live and work. Further, as members of a social community, the theory of social learning comes into play, as learning is more focused upon “how we learn than simply on what we learn” (Brown, & Adler, 2008, p.18). This becomes significant, as we seek to establish the characteristics of an autonomous individual, which are thoughtful, authentic, and original thinkers. Through a review of the literature, we know that students who engage in self-regulated, self-determined methods to scholarship have higher levels of achievement and are consistently more satisfied in their educational activities (Pintrich, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). Further, according to O’Donnell, Chang, and Miller (2013), college students who enjoy a substantial sense of autonomy experience success in both the academic and social setting, thus illustrating transference of the benefits of autonomy. It is important to note that students find a greater sense of satisfaction with the academic enterprise as well as an increase in self-accomplishment (Petrina, 1992).
In many academic situations, students lack the environmental design necessary to promote self-direction allowing them control over their circumstances, which is a vital aspect of development (Erikson, 1950). As independence has the capacity to produce a positive emotional state, correspondingly, the lack of independence has the potential to erode the self-esteem of the student. It would be Morrison (1997) who suggests that choice, by its very nature, produces opportunities for learners to stretch their minds in search for new answers using new ideas. In the absence of such design, students are stifled and lack the basic opportunity to develop autonomy and independence.

The intention of those promoting an education devoted to developing autonomy is to produce a well rounded individual capable of reaching his or her fullest potential (Eisner, 1985; Plato, trans 1935), and thus embracing the characteristics necessary for advancing the needs of society. According to Schneewind (2005) advocates of this approach include such renowned philosophers as Kant, Locke, Machiavelli, Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire), and Jean Jacques Rousseau. The focus for such an endeavor would strive to produce an environment that challenges the individual to consider aspects of autonomy as necessary components of fulfillment.

The literature emphasizes the importance for educators to seek an understanding of the various periods of autonomy experienced by students, as they attempt to define themselves as capable learners (Holec, 1981; Hussey & Smith, 2010). Developing autonomy presents new avenues of freedoms and opportunities not previously experienced, as the learner assumes an active role in the educational process (Ryan & Deci, 1987). This approach to education promotes an eagerness to employ these newly found liberties, in the pursuit of knowledge (Barefoot, 2008). It is even more pursuant as it pertains to the period in which a student must
develop his or her contextual skills and self-awareness as it relates to the ability to successfully negotiate oneself through the educational system. Perhaps even more importantly, the student must be presented with an opportunity to engage in and develop complex relationships, which are critical to both academic and social success (Hoffman, 2005).

The educational process for autonomy development begins with the student at the center of learning enterprise, and then expands outward in relation to his or her ability to develop independent critical thinking skills (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Pintrich, 2000). As students experience the opportunity to not only develop ideas, but also to put those ideas into action allows for the exercise and courage of self-guided discovery. The result of this intentional planning is a cohesive self-sufficient student capable of greater achievement (Aviram, 1993).

This approach to developing autonomy serves to incorporate certain elements from a non-prescribed curricular design (Joseph, 2011). This sense of development constitutes an ever-evolving endeavor where the student voluntarily ascends to the height of his or her educational desires (Buchner, 1903). Developing autonomy seeks to cultivate authentic thinkers capable of creating meaning through actions and interactions with others. This process yokes the natural interests of the student and applies that to the learning process, as noted by educational scholar Kilpatrick, “somewhere in the child lay the key to a revitalized curriculum” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 135). As such, using the interests of the learner to ignite the educational activity would promote the development of authenticity and originality, which as discussed previously are characteristics of autonomy. These attributes are also integral aspects to the Personal Relevance Theory with its emphasis on “personal growth, integrity, autonomy, and unique meaning” (Petrina, 1992, p. 38). The gains of utilizing such an approach to education ensures a holistic advancement of the
learner with a high capacity for becoming “self-actualizing, autonomous, authentic” (p. 38) so that the student will develop into a productive and competent member of society.

This theoretical perspective incorporates the key elements of the educational humanist, as the emphasis is squarely placed upon the process of meaning making, the integration of the whole learner, and the experience of all stakeholders. Petrina (1992), states that learning how to learn remains a central concern of educators and that “self-directed, original, creative, and critical thinking people” (p. 44) are essential components of a healthy society. This sentiment is echoed by Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) in that students must first be instructed on the principles of learning and advanced by Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) as being fundamental qualities for successful academic performance in the classroom.

To develop an individual with the capacity to manage his or her learning affairs (Holec, 1981) a structure must first be fashioned where education embraces “process, learning and understanding…through dialogue and reflection (Doll, 1993, p. 157). In this approach understanding is accomplished through the dialogical exchange with others. This is a unique aspect, and one that Bruner (1983) would agree, as he affirms the idea that humans are unique in that they learn from one another. Doll further elaborates on his vision of a new frame with the understanding that the “learner…needs to know the material studied well enough…to solve, interpret, analyze” (p. 164), but the learner also must be able to “play with the material in imaginative and quirky manners” (p. 164) as well. This approach to education inherently fosters autonomy as discussed by Waite (1994) in the need to acquire skills that can be transferred to areas beyond the classroom. This approach celebrates the idea that students will learn how to think, as opposed to simply being provided more information to remember (Buchner, 1904). The
framework of personal growth and autonomy embraces the educational approach “that unapologetically recognizes the artistry of teaching” (Eisner, 1985, p. 22).

Petrina (1992) discusses personal growth in similar terms to the concept of self-actualization established by Eisner and Vallance (1974). He considers it to be a holistic process of fostering fulfillment through authenticity and self-authorship through the “integration of cognitive, creative, aesthetic, moral, and vocational dimensions of being human” (p. 38). Remember this level of fulfillment is in line with the opinions offered by Raz (1986) in that fulfillment is established through the exercise of self-direction throughout the course of one’s life. Likewise, the frame of personal growth and autonomy maintains an emphasis on the significance behind the process of learning how to learn (Bruner, 1971, 1996). This learner-centered approach is where the personal needs and desires of students are met and enriched to support the function of society (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009).

This educational approach provides for the encouragement of active participation where students assist in the development of activities. Based upon McNeil (1981), students and the instructor negotiate responsibilities, assessment, and learning objectives based upon the collective sense of competencies and curiosities. The emphasis of instruction is based upon interaction with the integration of each participant’s feelings, attitudes, and interpretations. Of course the relevance aspect encompasses teachers developing “educational programs in concert with students” rather than following the current prescriptive curriculum now gripping the nation (Eisner, 1985, p. 69). This approach emphasizes the social component as both student and teacher are morphed into “living creatures attempting to broaden and deepen the quality of their experience” (p. 70).
Both McNeil (1981) and Petrina (1992) argue that this form of education promotes autonomy through a democratically driven process that provides a noticeable sense of transference of the learning into a larger social role such as participation in the American democracy. Yeager (2010) espouses the benefit of aligning the educational activity to the needs and interests of the student where the peculiarity of each individual can be fostered in a supportive learning environment. Through the curriculum orientation of personal growth and autonomy students achieve “personal fulfillment…[where] individuals discover and develop their unique identities…through an enriching experience” (Eisner and Vallance, 1974, p. 105), which is child-centered (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009) and process driven (Bruner, 1996). These are the very fundamentals of autonomy as discussed earlier by Rawls (1999) and Raz (1986).

This form of education values the natural development of human nature through an exploration of his or her lived environment and social contexts. According to Candy (1991) students learn best and are engaged longer in activities where personal interest has been recognized and incorporated. However, there are certain aspects that could lead to educational and social challenges. For example, the educator, who is actually the facilitator, must possess a tremendous expertise in the theories and practices associated with collaboration, cooperation, and communication. The teacher would need to provide “sufficient structure and guidance for the…[learner’s] experience” (Eisner, 1985, p. 73) so that the activity would remain productive, but not “prescriptive or coercive” (p. 73).

Regardless, the approach to education that moves beyond content, without ignoring the importance of transferred knowledge, but rather promotes the ability to manipulate meaning and application (Bruner, 1996), is one that encourages human development. This approach provides the essential platform for students to engage higher level thinking skills, as they become active
participants (Buchner, 1904), where the process holds the highest position of value (Clarke, 2007).

Educational scholar Zhao (2012) advances the idea that students of the 21st Century need not spend time searching and applying for their future jobs. Instead, he advances the concept that students must possess the creativity and authenticity to create their next position. He insists that modern students have become effective employees, able to follow the direction of others, but nearly incapable of determining for themselves the best course of action. This lack of creativity and imagination is a problem plaguing students today, which will then become a societal problem tomorrow (Resnick, 2008) as students lack the confidence to fully participate (Ward et al., 2012). Zhao describes a future where the “well-prepared citizen…needs to be creative, entrepreneurial, and globally competent” (p. 15). As such, there exists a true need to foster both the creativity and authenticity most often associated with student autonomy and strive to move beyond the bounding restraints of a classroom environment. As witnessed by Macaskill and Denovan (2013) the development of student self-confidence advances the idea that autonomous learning is essential to success in college and is linked to “to the independent search for knowledge” (p. 137). Self-regulation (Costa & Sandars, 2012), and the connection between autonomy and distance education (Seiver & Troja, 2014) are considered in this section and speak to the need to further understand retention attrition.

Consequences of Students who Lack Autonomy

College campuses across the nation are seething with young adults who are experiencing more than the excited anticipation of pursuing the dream of a college degree. Instead, many students are confronted with near paralyzing levels of psychological distress as they attempt to navigate the unfamiliar responsibilities of higher education (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton,
For many students, this represents the first time where they experience both the freedom and encouragement to engage in the organic activities of establishing an adult identity (Tinto, 1986). However exciting, this new phase of individual growth can be equated to uncultivated territory, as students lack the experience in self-determination to adequately adjust to these new challenges. According to the most recent National Survey of College and University Counseling Center Directors, involving 228 locations that represent 2.3 million students, 91% of directors indicate a trend of students exhibiting “severe psychological problems” (Gallagher & Taylor, 2011, p.4). Additionally, reviewing a five-year trending pattern, directors have also reported 78% of students seeking service which precipitated an immediate response, with 77% requiring psychiatric medication and 42% engaging in self-injury issues such as “cutting to relieve anxiety” (p.5).

Such alarming statistics beg the question of why these young adults are experiencing this amplified and resounding level of distress. Recent contentions hold that academic performance (Heiligenstein & Guenther, 1996) and college-related stressors such as resource allocation, scholarship expectation, and prioritization are significant contributing factors to psychological disorders in college students (Weber, Metha, & Nelson, 1997; Furr, R.S., Westefeld, S.J., McConnell, N.G., & Jenkins, M.J., 2001). Further, there exists a link connecting these behavioral and psychological disorders of depression and anxiety, which are now plaguing young adults, to the exercise of individual autonomy, self-control, and self-efficacy (Dalgard, Thapa, Hauff, McCubbin, & Syed, 2006; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009; Gray, 2010; Sher-Censor, Parke, & Coltrane, 2011).
As the student experiences the negative emotions due to social or academic set-back, which are inherent with the collegiate experience (Walton & Cohen, 2011), combined with the inability to assert dominion over life choices (Sher-Censor, Parke, & Coltrane, 2011), he or she is more likely to experience an increase in the internalized level of anxiety (Lareau, 2011; McKenna, 2012). Parenting expert Lori Gottlieb (2011) states that young adults today express that they are feeling more “anxious and entitled” (p. 78) because they lack the ability to make independent and unimpeded decisions, in a world filled with a multitude of choice. These feelings of anxiety, if left unchecked, have the potential of leading the student to feeling isolated, alienated, and “that they do not belong” in college because they aren’t good enough (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1448; Ward et al., 2012). Social scholar Jackson (2007) illuminates the application of personal autonomy, through the exercise of self-government, as a means for obtaining greater individual fulfillment in facing and overcoming adversity. It can then be argued that, by necessity, individuals must experience opportunities to develop autonomous thinking in order to mitigate these feelings of anxiety and depression. This greater experience of self-direction allows individuals to then act according to internal motivations rather than through the manipulations, or suggestions of others (LaVaque-Manty, 2006).

**Academic Persistence in Higher Education**

According to Engle and Tinto (2008), the US “continues to have one of the highest college participation rates in the world” (p. 5) thus, superficially, holding a position that appears to represent a model of educational success. This claim is supported by the Pew Research Center (as cited in Yen, 2010) in that the US is experiencing a rise in college enrollment not seen since the Vietnam War era. In fact, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPED, 2014) reports “In fall 2012, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions was
17.7 million students, [which is] an increase of 48 percent from 1990” (n.p.). Certainly this demonstrates that the US is experiencing prolonged levels of high student enrollment, but that, in itself, does not necessarily equate to educational success. Rather, it is the percentage of degree completion that serves as true measure of success.

Unfortunately, while enrollment has reached encouraging levels, “the nation ranks in the bottom half [of industrialized nations] in terms of degree completion” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 5). This trend helped to inspire President Obama in 2009 when he announced his plans for the American Graduation Initiative, which seeks to bolster US degree and certification attainment by 2020 (American Association for Community Colleges, 2011; Schneider, 2010). In this, the onus shifts from one focused solely on enrollment to one of academic attainment, where the individual reaches his or her educational goal. The two areas receiving the greatest amount of coverage in the literature concerning student attrition are Tinto’s (1975) theory on student departure and the notion that students require support during periods of transition (Barefoot, 2008; Ritchhart, 2002; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2004). Tinto (1985, 1986, 1993, 2005) advocates the need for students to become socially and intellectually incorporated into the community as means to motivate the decision to remain in college. Supporting students through challenging transitional periods involves methods of developing contextual skills that allow the individual to identify and access support service.

**Theories of Student Persistence**

While access and enrollment in higher education are reaching historic levels (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Bragg & Durham, 2012), rates of college persistence continue to remain an area of concern. As previously noted, student attrition has now topped 50% of enrollment, with 67% of those dropping out within the first three semesters of matriculation (Center for Community
Complicating the problem is the realization that nearly 25% of all university students dropout of four-year institutions between their second and third academic terms (Ryan, 2004), with over 50% doing so at the two-year institutional level (NCES, 2010 & 2013). These stats support Tinto’s (1993) assumption that the experiences of the student while in college are significant factors that influence the decision to either persist or withdraw.

Since the 1970s institutions of higher learning have struggled to address the increasing number of students who depart during the academic year (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). For decades, administrators and educators alike have turned to theories of retention and persistence as a curative for student attrition, believing that educational programming can stem the tide of student departure. These theories are generally classified within one of the following groupings: economic, organizational, psychological, or sociological (Seidman, 2012). Tinto (1975, 1986, 1993, 2005) has been acknowledged as the prominent scholar in the field of retention (Braxton, 2008, Hussey & Smith, 2010; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella et al., 2004; Seidman, 2012). When considering Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure, it embraces a sociological perspective as the individual student seeks to become integrated into both the academic and social system of the institution through formal and informal interactions. In this, the student is opened to new experiences, which is contextualized in the shared culture of the institution, and shaped by the influence of those interactions. Other theories such as Astin’s (1985, 1999) Theory of Involvement, is an extension of Tinto’s ideas and is connected to the psychological perspective in that it is based upon certain assumptions involving the manner, or behavior, in which students learn. In this instance, Astin contends that
students are more likely to learn through the behavior, or action, of being involved within the academic community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

**Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure**

As institutions of higher learning scramble to stem the tide of student attrition, Tinto (1975) advocates that they must first consider their commitment to increasing the level of student engagement and incorporation. His view examines attrition from a longitudinal perspective in that student persistence is grounded in a “complex series of socio-psychological interactions between the student and the institutional environment” (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978, p. 348). The result of these interactions is a student who has become fully incorporated into the academic community as evidenced by the value added through his or her contributions to the environment (Tinto, 2005). For Tinto (1993), the choice to either persist or withdraw from the community is based upon a variety of dynamics such as familial and individual characteristics, academic preparation, academic performance, and the ability to intellectually and socially integrate into the community. Tinto holds that these dynamics are interactional in nature exerting both a direct and indirect influence on student departure. The implicit concept is that the individual goals held by the student, as well as his or her commitments to those goals are constantly interacting and being influenced by those dynamics.

Tinto’s (1975) original model remains one of the most effective explanatory designs to date explaining the contributing factors to student persistence (Braxton, 2008, Hussey & Smith, 2010; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella et al., 2004; Seidman, 2012; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978; Terenzini et al., 1994). It is his position that programs capable of integrating students into the academic community have the potential to dramatically reduce rates of student attrition. The idea embraces a sociological appreciation that persistence is predicated
upon the individual student becoming both socially and intellectually incorporated into the academic community (Tinto, 1987, 2005). Once this occurs, the student must continue in a perceived role as a competent member of the community, with the ability to further the intellectual and social condition for all members (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Seidman, 2012).

Tinto (1993) contends that the concept of student involvement, in the form of intellectual and social programming, leads to higher rates of retention and completion as the student has successfully transitioned into a new role of membership. The literature demonstrates that institutions would benefit by providing both academic and social programming that serves to incorporate the student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1987), and the student must in turn possess the autonomy to take advantage of those efforts. Structurally speaking the literature suggests that institutions fail to recognize this need by ignoring the complete “life cycle” of the student, which includes recruitment, enrollment, and graduation (Wild & Ebbers, 2003, p. 512). Tinto contends that as the institution demonstrates a sincere concern for the social and academic wellbeing of the student, the student will in turn work harder to secure his or her position in the academic environment. Through this symbiotic commitment, student incorporation has the potential to increase degree attainment, as rates of student attrition decrease through the student’s perception that he or she is a valued member of the community (Salanova et al., 2010).

Tinto’s (1975, 1988) *Model of Institutional Departure* provides a paradigm through which to view the process of student persistence or departure within the context of higher education. The supposition of either persistence or departure is based upon the individual’s interactions with the complexities of the institution through both intellectual and social activities (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). The theory is that each student must traverse three separate
stages of development in order to be fully incorporated into the educational environment (Tinto, 1993). The progression through each stage is based upon the associated works of Van Gennep’s (1960) rites of passage to adulthood and Durkheim’s (1951) study of suicide.

Drawing upon Durkheim’s (1951) theory of suicide, Tinto (1975) asserts that the decision to drop out of college, like the decision to commit suicide, is situated upon the level of integration experienced by the individual. The perception is linked to the willful act of the individual to remove him or herself from the community due to a lack of connection. Durkheim posits that the act of suicide is predicated upon the lack of societal integration of the individual and that in the absence of social supports, purposefully withdrawing via suicide becomes an authentic possibility. Tinto (1993) links the academic and social activities of the institution as the means through which the individual can become integrated into the community. He further contends that failure to engage in these communal systems has the potential to influence the decision to persist or voluntarily withdraw, thus creating the metaphor of suicide from an academic point of view. This sentiment corresponds with Durkheim’s study of suicide in that the individual reaches a voluntary decision to no longer participate.

Again, Tinto (1988) would draw upon the world beyond education and reach into the field of social anthropology to add to his Model of Institutional Departure by exploring the “rites of membership in tribal societies” (p. 440). He turned to the research of Van Gennep (1960) where individuals were described as experiencing a variety of memberships within society throughout the course of his or her lifetime. These evolving memberships provided society with increased stability through the transfer of ideals, values, and social norms. In particular, Tinto was interested in the manner through which an individual, in this case a student, would transition from the membership in society as a child into an environment where he or she would develop an
adult identity with a new set of unique responsibilities and privileges. The rites of passages, as discussed by Van Gennep, represented the stages of separation as defined by Tinto in terms of “separation, transition, and incorporation” (p. 440).

Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993) describes these stages as representative of changes in the pattern of behavior between the individual and the community. Each stage offers a new perspective through which the individual is portrayed in the community. The primary stage involves a separation of the individual from past associations of culture, values, and familiarity. This disassociation reveals a lessening of the influence of those former associations, thus providing a vacuum in which new self-governing identities can be formulated. It is during this phase where independence can be birthed in the form of an adult identity capable of choosing the desired course of action without the influences of previous relationships. The ability to become fully integrated into the academic community rests upon the individual student disassociating themselves from the restraints of previous influences. Tinto suggests that this stage presents each student with a certain level of distress to overcome, and inherently possesses a significant potential to frustrate the educational goals of students and disrupt their persistence. If students are unable to adjust to this new membership, the literature suggests that the student will make the choice to withdraw and revert back to a former association.

The second stage of the model, the transition stage, centers on the first year of college student enrollment. Tinto (1988) considers this to be the “passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for association with communities of the present” (p. 444). It is a period where students further loosen associations of the past and begin to give voice and structure to their burgeoning ideals and assumptions of their role in the new community. For many, this period represents the end of their academic career, as they are unable to cope with the
stressors associated with the college experience (Tinto, 1975). The literature is explicit in that it is during this period when students choose to withdraw, not due to the inability to academically perform or due to an inability to engage, but rather due to the “inability to withstand and cope” (p. 444) with this transitional period. Unlike the conditions experienced by Van Gennep (1960), the individual has a choice to either persist or depart as they reflect upon the convergence of opposing values, ideals, or beliefs of with the new community. According to Tinto, these students have not developed the self-awareness to direct their resources in a manner that serves to address their needs, rather they are more comfortable in removing themselves from the conflicting situation. Students that fall into this category begin to question their goals, as the commitment needed to persist in college begins to diminish. It is Tinto’s position that when the individual student learns how to effectively navigate these struggles, while concurrently engaging in social and intellectual activities, the likelihood of their persistence increases dramatically (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Seidman, 2012).

Finally, as students have successfully separated from previous associations of culture and behavior and learned to balance the stresses associated with the first year of enrollment, they enter the final stage of incorporation (Tinto, 1975, 1988). It is during this phase where individuals seek to identify novel behaviors that are appropriate within the new setting. It is in this final stage were students fully assume new roles within the community and are established as contributing members who have been culturally assimilated into the institutional setting (Tinto, 1993). Tinto demonstrates through intellectual and social integration of the student, which includes formal and informal interactions with faculty, peers, and staff, this stage represents an alignment of beliefs and values to the culture of the community.
With the increase of enrollment and the stagnation of degree attainment the literature suggests that institutions of higher education can ill afford to sit idle as college student departure soars and incoming students struggle to persist (Tinto, 1986). It is suggested in the literature that institutions take steps to reevaluate the transitional periods associated with students as they enter and experience higher education (Barefoot, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Seidman, 2012; Terenzini et al, 1996). As advocated by Wild and Ebbers (2003) the institution must concern itself with the student throughout the educational experience and offer services that support each transitional phase. Tinto (1993) advances the notion that these activities “involve identifying, understanding and assimilating a complex range of assumptions, behaviors and practices” (p. 159), which in turn allows for a safe environment to experience transitional growth leading to student incorporation (Hussey, 2008). The benefit of such incorporation becomes obvious as the student attempts to develop complex relationships, which are critical to both academic and social success (Hoffman, 2005; Tinto, 1975). In the literature, the significance of student engagement occurs in the form of “academic and social integration” leading to individual advancements in academic achievement and social success (Austin, 1985; Tinto, 1993). The idea is that as the student feels more connected or in tune with the institutional environment, he or she will reciprocate through more time spent engaged in the learning process. Roman (2007) indicates that student incorporation has a direct correlation to both the quality and quantity of resources that the student spends on academic assignments, thus lending weight to the need to further explore the connection.

While institutions spend considerable resources in the support of academic remediation as the primary curative of student attrition (Bahr, 2012; Roman, 2007; Schnee, 2014) there exists significant literature demonstrating the need to further explore other factors (Astin, 1985,
Maggio, White, Molstad, & Khre, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Seidman, 2012; Terenzini et al, 1996; Tinto, 1986). As students attempt to create meaning of their experiences through their newly contextualized position within the academic community, students strive for a sense of balance. It is during this period when students experience dynamic shifts of personal perception regarding associations with both friends and family (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). While each individual student, over the course of his or her lifetime, will experience periods of unique developmental stress, the academic transitions into middle school, high school, and college are common to all (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). To many, these periods offer difficulties as the student attempts to adjust to the increasing demands of interacting and engaging in an environment of new social and academic system expectations. Scholars such as Astin and Tinto encourage institutions of higher learning to focus on helping students identify problematic periods and then work to offer supportive systems that address the newly identified needs. By taking such proactive steps, this will identify patterns of successful transition where the learner will develop coping skills necessary to avoid future academic and social hardships and remain actively incorporated into the learning process (Tinto, 1975).

**Transition into Higher Education**

According to Barefoot (2008) and Ritchhart (2002) it is vitally important for institutions and educators to understand the various transitions experienced by students as they attempt to define themselves as adult learners within higher education. Barefoot describes these transitions in terms of self-awareness as it relates to the student being college ready, understanding family relationships, and the ability to communicate effectively within the institution. For perhaps the first time, students possess avenues to new freedoms and rights not seen at the secondary level and are eager to employ these newly found liberties (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). These
transitions are an important period where a student develops his or her contextual skills and self-awareness as it pertains to the ability to successfully navigate the college experience.

Hoffman (2005) considers the importance of the individual’s capability to engage and develop complex relationships both within and beyond the institution as a critical component to academic and social success. This sentiment connects back to Tinto’s (1993) model linking the significance of student engagement through “academic and social integration”, as a means for becoming incorporated in the university, which ultimately leads to advancements in academic achievement and social success. The concept as advocated by both Hoffman and Tinto is one that as the student feels more connected to the university system, he or she will apply greater emphasis on time spent engaged in the learning process as a reciprocated action. The literature suggests that student assimilation is a key factor relating to the quality and quantity of time spent on tasks in higher education (Roman, 2007). It is in this shared commitment, between the student and the institution, where authentic student engagement occurs ultimately leading to a decrease of student attrition and an increase of student retention. If the student perceives that the institution is taking a personal interest into the well being of the learner, this is more likely to produce a positive response to future academic performance (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010).

As discussed by Hussey and Smith (2008), one of the more significant transitions experienced by college students is one involving the shift from a passive learner to one of an autonomous active learner. This transition embraces Tinto’s (1993) reflections on the rites of passage in that the student transitions from one role to another within the community. Hussey and Smith discuss the “transition of a young person into adulthood” (p. 158), as a culturally relevant concept that is experienced on the college campus. This transition involves the
autonomy of the individual who gains the necessary “knowledge, skills, and abilities” (p. 158) to pursue his or her chosen course of study. Institutions and educators can support this transition through programming and activities that foster these skills. When institutions of higher learning focus on deep learning, through an appreciation of the transitional periods experienced by students, the value and measurement of student progress is based upon the “student’s individual development” (p. 157).

DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004) advance the idea that most if not all institutions of higher learning are focusing solely on academic aptitude and academic skill sets. College and university rankings are established through quantitative data sets leaving institutions to pondering whether or not shifting resources to address individual transitional needs is essential. Hussey and Smith (2010) challenge leaders of higher education to reconsider the traditional view of the structure and learning environment and instead “facilitate those transitions which are considered worthwhile by the culture and by those involved” (p. 161). In this regard, the interests and needs of each student becomes a pivotal aspect of the educational process through the development of support services. The basis for this shift in dynamics revolves around the notion that the various transitions students undergo are very individualistic and the institution must respond to these needs through the perspective of the learner. Salanova et al. (2010) and Barefoot (2008) concur that by incorporating the needs of the student into the structure of institutional supports the result will be a transitional period that incorporates the value and personal expectations of each learner. Hussey and Smith acknowledge the complex transitions facing first year students, which involve areas of autonomy, social and cultural preference, and the context in which the learner views him or herself in relation to the world around them.
Educational philosopher Robert Hutchins (as cited by Mayer, 1993, p. 90) stated, “Higher education is to unsettle the minds [of students]…to widen their horizons, to inflame intellects”. As such, the primary purpose of education itself is to induce transitional periods of growth and development, while supporting students in some areas and circumventing obstacles in others (Hussey & Smith, 2010). In the end these transitional periods are necessary so that the learner will ultimately critically reflect upon his or her experiences, which will then inform the manner they view the world around them (Barefoot, 2008). These reflections, in turn, induce changes in the emotions, behaviors, and actions of the individual that influence the learning environment and society beyond the institution.

Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the institution to support these transitions, as it will direct the structure of the learning environment and lead to the greatest development of the student (Venezia et al., 2004). Tinto (1986) would attest that addressing student retention occurs as the institution seeks to involve and incorporate the student into the learning environment, and that this occurs in both formal and informal settings. Likewise, creating an environment where the student transitions comfortably into his or her role as an active learner, also influences persistence. Failure to effectively focus on transitional periods, which include a variety of contextualized skill sets, will only serve to blur the lines of accountability and contribute to greater numbers of students failing to meet their educational goals (Hussey and Smith, 2010).

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter the literature demonstrated the need to contend against student attrition in higher education, as it negatively affects the individual student (Barefoot, 2008; Baum et al., 2013), the institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Wild & Ebbers, 2003), and the nation (Barbatis, 2010; Riseman, 2013). Further, the literature has portrayed first generation college students as a
unique subpopulation deserving special consideration (Rendon, 1994), as they are more likely to face adverse conditions and therefore depart college prematurely (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terezin et al., 1994). With this information, the search to find a remedy to address student departure is of paramount importance for this proposed study. Further, with the understanding that attending college is a highly social enterprise, it would only seem obvious to explore social constructs that have the potential to address student attrition.

Autonomy, as difficult to define as it may be, holds unique characteristics that are highly coveted and viewed as a means to assume ownership over the direction of one’s life (Rawls, 1996). The literature demonstrates the strength of autonomy (Dworkin, 1988; Raz, 1986) in the self-direction of one’s course through life and in particular life in a democratic society (Heyneman, 2003; McAvoy, 2013). The literature also extolls autonomous characteristics through education (Buchner, 1904; Kindlon, 2001) as the method of achieving self-fulfillment (Brunner, 1996; Eisner, 1985). These autonomous benefits contextualized in a specific course or classroom setting (Holec, 1981; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schinkel, 2010; Zimmerman & Bandura, 2000) are established through the literature leading to higher rates of academic success. This success leaves one to consider if students experience positive outcomes in a course, would they experience positive outcomes in an entire course of study in terms of degree attainment with greater autonomy? According to Garcia and Pintrich (1996), the answer is, yes. Their study revealed that college student autonomy within the confines of a classroom setting has the capacity to carry over into the future success of the learner in other courses. This understanding provides the catalyst for the currently proposed dissertation, and may very well hold the key to improving student persistence and retention.
Studies and articles were also reviewed illuminating the psychosocial challenges plaguing current students, as they express a lack of control over the college experience (Benton et al., 2003; Heiligenstein & Guenther, 1996; Kitzow, 2003; Rice et al., 2012). This lack of control is a symptom of diminished autonomy and provides a basis to study the interactions and experiences of college student autonomy. The literature review also examined retention models (Tinto, 1975, 1983, 1996) and periods of transition (Barefoot, 2008; Hussey & Smith, 2008; Salanova et al., 2010) as a means for enhancing the college experience and addressing the aforementioned rise in student attrition.

Having reviewed the literature concerning college student attrition, autonomy, and first generation college students, it is conceivable that fostering autonomy could influence college persistence. Autonomy has been shown to provide a variety of benefits to both the individual student as well as society yet it remains largely unexplored. Recognizing the gap in the literature concerning autonomy and college persistence, and recalling the purpose of this proposed study, which is to gain a better understanding of the awareness and fostering of autonomy by first generation university undergraduates, the topic deserves exploration. Employing the interpretive tradition of phenomenology, and building upon theories of student persistence, this study seeks to gain knowledge from the participants’ point of view about potential conditions that contribute to and further extend Dworkin’s (1988) notion of autonomy. The intention of the proposed study is to generate a new perspective on degree attainment by furthering the literature beyond learner autonomy and course success, to individual autonomy and degree success.

In the end, the literature outlines a significant problem complete with symptoms and potential remedies to accentuate student success and demonstrates a need for additional study. However, Garcia and Pintrich (1996) state, “the overwhelming majority of the literature about
this topic (classroom autonomy) has focused on elementary school aged children” (p. 478) and advance the idea it should be explored on the college campus.
Chapter Three: Methodology

As stated in chapter one, the purpose of this proposed study is to understand the experiences and meanings of first generation college students according to their interactions with autonomy at a Midwestern public university. This proposed study seeks to explore these interactions with each participant as they lived through those experiences (Husserl, 1931). This chapter presents the proposed methodology and methods that will be used to understand the experiences of each participant, ultimately identifying a collective representation. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the research paradigm along with the strategy of investigation. Following, the chapter will adhere to an outline that depicts the proposed research location, participant selection, methods for data collection, and methods for data analysis. During this trek, the qualifications of the researcher will be considered, along with concerns of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Research Paradigm

Recall in chapter one the guiding question for this proposed dissertation, which provides structure for the inquiry process and data analysis (Janesick, 2000):

- How is autonomy perceived and experienced by first-generation university undergraduate students, or recent graduates, at a Midwestern public university, and do those experiences influence academic persistence?

This guiding question then triggered the following research questions, which serve to inform the interview process:

- How do first generation university students experience autonomy regarding the decision to attend an institution of higher learning?
• How do first generation university students define the nature and conditions of autonomy development?
• How do first generation university students experience autonomy in relation to academic persistence?

When attempting to understand the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences surrounding a given phenomenon, a qualitative paradigm is most suitable (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Vagel, 2014). Creswell (2009) underscores this sentiment by indicating that qualitative inquiry provides a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals… ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). As autonomy is a unique human condition, pursuing a qualitative paradigm will enable the researcher to explore the phenomenon in the environment where it is experienced. As quantitative research lacks the dialogical exchange between researcher and participant, it fails to fully embrace the experience of first generation students as well as the meaning ascribed to those experiences. Moreover, as the quantitative paradigm often constrains the phenomenon as well as the researcher, it lacks the flexibility to allow understanding to emerge through the research process (Patton, 2002), and is therefore, unsuitable for this proposed study.

Guba and Lincoln (1990) challenge researchers with the idea that humanity exists on a plane beyond that which can be empirically observed. As such, any attempt to study humanity would, by necessity, incorporate more than an observational approach. The pursuit of exploring the human condition encompasses an understanding that individuals possess the aptitude to view the world individually through a lens that has been socially molded (Kuhn, 1996). It is this view that shapes and informs the voice of participants within a qualitative study. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative inquiry permits the voice to emerge through qualitative methods.
Drawing upon Crotty’s (2010) epistemological paradigm of constructionism, the researcher acknowledges that meaning “comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (p. 8). Specifically, Crotty explains that meaning is constructed, not discovered, and that “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (p. 9). This understanding has informed the decision to frame this proposed study within Creswell’s (2007) worldview of social constructivism. Such a worldview embraces the assumption that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). This worldview also permits the application of a critical lens, as the manner in which individuals ascribe meaning is both “socially and historically” (p. 8) constructed through interactions with others. These interactions become highly complex as experienced through cultural and societal norms. Therefore, this proposed study will focus on the intricacy of those interpretations, and strive to capture the essence of the lived experiences through a phenomenological research approach.

**Research Strategy: Phenomenology**

Vagel (2014) makes the point that “phenomena are the ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living” (p. 20). He goes on to elicit the fundamental purpose of phenomenological research as the manner in which “we find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others…and other things” (p. 20), as drawn from Heidegger (1998/1927). Phenomenology provides a more comprehensive understanding “of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences…[which] bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 2001, p. 9). To study the meanings ascribed by first generation college students to their experiences with autonomy, phenomenology provides the most appropriate research strategy.
As noted in Chapter 2 phenomenological studies exist that explore autonomy within education in terms of teacher autonomy (Castle, 2006; Fumoto, 2011; Vaughn, 2013), principal autonomy (Gawlik, 2008) and developing learner or student autonomy (Booth, 2008; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996). However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the study of autonomy regarding first generation university students and persistence. The fact that phenomenological studies concerning autonomy in education exist provides credibility to this proposal and justification for engaging in a study of phenomenology.

This proposed phenomenological inquiry will utilize a descriptive approach that seeks to explore how students describe the phenomenon of autonomy and their experiences with autonomy from their perspectives, through their senses (Husserl, 1970/1936). Giorgi (2009) is used to inform this proposed study as it relates to the descriptive approach, as are the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of Dahlberg (2006) and Dahlberg et al. (2008). In particular, this dissertation embraces the significance of using the descriptions of others concerning their interaction with the phenomenon under study and communicating the invariant meanings based on the analysis of data. This approach is highly reductionist in nature, requiring the researcher to “use human consciousness to study human consciousness” through bracketing previous knowledge “to analyze the raw data from a fresh perspective” (Vagle, 2014, p. 54). The aim of this form of phenomenology is reductionist in nature, as this dissertation seeks to explore the individual student experiences with autonomy to a description of a collective essence (Creswell, 2007). This approach provides both an individualistic and collective description of autonomy as well as the experience and meaning from the phenomenon. Descriptive phenomenology provides a means for first generation students to describe their experiences with autonomy, as well as how autonomy was experienced (Patton, 2002).
This proposed study is constructed in such a way as to explore both the individual and shared meanings that students make through their lived experiences with autonomy. The intended dissertation engages first generation university students in a reflective discourse where their experiences with autonomy are shared with the researcher along with the meaning ascribed to those experiences. The benefit of engaging in phenomenological research is to explore the phenomenon, autonomy, from a variety of positions in search of the central essence of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology provides a framework through which to search for the essential meaning of the experiences for those first generation students as they lived it (Cresswell, 1998). This philosophical approach provides greater access to the organic world of the lived experiences of participants, as they reflect upon their encounters as first-generation university students. Through a phenomenological approach the researcher is able to translate the experiences of participants with autonomy into text, while concurrently capturing the meaning associated with those experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Finlay (2013) advances the idea that Phenomenology is more than a “philosophical movement” (p. 173) as it embraces a rich tradition of “seeing how things appear to us through experience…[and] demands an open way of being “ (p. 173). Phenomenology seeks to elucidate the finite details, as perceived and interpreted by the actors, surrounding a given phenomenon within a specific context through a description of those experiences (Giorgi, 2009). Heidegger (1927/1962) contends that phenomenology exists to better understand the essence of a concept of a phenomenon. In this study, that essence is centered on the meaning as derived through the lived experiences of first generation university students, and to understand the influence, if any, autonomy has on student persistence. The impetus of this study is to search for the essential meaning ascribed by participants to their experiences with autonomy (Creswell, 1998).
Creswell (2007) states that those who engage in a phenomenological study enter the field with open minds and “focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 58). To capture the collective quintessence of first generation university student autonomy, the researcher will explore not only the individual experience of each participant, but also how they experienced autonomy (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (1998) states it this way, “from the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived…[as] essences of structures of the experiences” (p. 54). In this, the goal is to extrapolate the shared essence of the experiences with autonomy from participants who have persisted to degree attainment. This occurs as the collective experience is reduced to represent the essence of the experience. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research inherently strives to give voice to the experience being described, and as this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of first generation university students who have persisted, this approach is appropriate. By this, the study seeks to move beyond the description of those experiences, and embrace the meaning ascribed, by the participants, to those experiences.

Credited to the genius of Edmund Husserl, what began as a philosophy has advanced into a research methodology (Creswell, 1998) that seeks to draw upon individual experiences as well as the manner in which they were experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology draws upon the collective experience of individuals to elicit a more rich understanding of the human condition (van Manen, 1990) from a unique position of the individual and is therefore not suitable for generalization (Giorgi, 1996). It is a philosophy targeting the nature of consciousness involving actors who engage with a phenomenon producing highly contextualized knowledge (Heidegger, 1962). According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (p. 57).
This proposed research study looks to understand autonomy, as experienced by first generation university students and thus contextualized within the university setting. Accordingly, Moustakas (1994) illustrates that phenomenology provides the framework to return with participants to their undergraduate experiences of autonomy (the what) and view the meaning (the how) they ascribed to those experiences. To accomplish this the researcher must enter the field free of preconceived notions by suspending, as much as possible, bias and thereby engage in the research through bracketing (Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 1990). This philosophical approach provides greater access to the organic world of the lived experiences of participants, as they reflect upon their encounters as first-generation university students.

This paradigm allows me to inductively explore the perspectives and experiences of a diverse population (Flick, 2009), in this case first generation university students. Such exploration allows for a deeper understanding of those experiences. It is Schwandt (2007), who emphasizes "to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations…It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick" (p. 296). To accurately capture the thick social actions of my participants and their experiences with autonomy, which is contextualized within higher education, phenomenology provides an ideal approach.

Certainly there exist other methodologies that could serve when exploring the social construct of autonomy to include survey research or ethnography. Yet, when it comes to exploring the lived experiences of first generation university students, phenomenology offers us access to the consciousness of the “things themselves” that we can visit, or revisit, through our experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 79). This type of research strives to explore an experience in terms that are only possible as lived by the participant (Creswell, 1998, 2007). The strength of this
methodology is established as descriptions of the experiences are created and not simply analyzed. It is a philosophy targeting the nature of consciousness involving actors who engage with a phenomenon producing highly contextualized knowledge, which in essence is the experience as it is experienced (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In this instance, phenomenology will provide a method for me to understand what autonomy means to first generation students, and under what conditions is was enhanced. Thus the “essences or structures of the experience” will be explored (Moustakas, 1994).

**Research Design**

This study has four compartments: (1) study location, (2) study participants, (3) data collection, and (4) data analysis and discussion. Each of these components are outlined in this section and based within the literature associated with phenomenological research.

**Study Location**

Hycner (1999) advances the understanding that the phenomenon itself dictates both the selection of study location as well as study participants. A midsized Midwest public university was selected for this study, based upon a variety of factors. First, this study sought to explore autonomy and persistence within the context of a Midwestern university and *U.S. News & World Report* has recognized this particular institution for 10 consecutive years regarding its emphasis on first-year retention programs. Second, the institution was selected due to the large percentage of first-generation full-time enrolled students. The third and final reason for choosing the study location was based upon the accessibility of the researcher to both the institution and study participants.

This study was conducted on the campus of a public four-year university located in the Midwestern portion of the United States. The university is positioned in a mid-sized rural
community with a population of 67,430. The university enrolls approximately 20,503 students of which 4,203 are graduate students, 16,300 are undergraduates, with 54% identifying as first generation university students. The demographic breakdown of all students is 38% male, 62% female with 15% identifying as ethnic minority. Students of this university represent 48 states, 2 U.S. territories, 43 countries, and every county within the state. With a student-to-faculty ratio of 16 to 1, the institution offers 7 associate, 179 baccalaureate, 99 master degrees, 2 specialist, and 17 doctoral degrees in seven academic colleges. During the 2013 - 2014 academic year 6,319 degrees were awarded. The university boasts 950 full-time faculty with an additional 2000 part-time faculty and staff.

**Participants**

This study sought to better understand autonomy through the lived experiences of first generation college students who persist. Therefore, identifying specific students who met these criteria was of the utmost importance. Moreover, recruiting participants whose rich life story will serve to inform the study as a means to “theorize the various ways things manifest and appear in and through our being in the world” was of equal significance (Vagle, 2014, p. 22). Creswell (2004) advances the idea to establish “an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 203), such as autonomy, utilizing a purposeful sampling strategy is essential. As the aim of this dissertation is to capture the voice of each participant and allow it to emerge through the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2007), identifying and selecting participants that inform the study is accomplished through a purposeful sampling strategy.

The purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of autonomy as experienced by first generation university students in terms of “information-rich cases…[regarding] depth and detail” (Patton, 1999, p. 1197). Therefore, the use of sampling criterion, as espoused by
Creswell (1998) was established. These criteria were (a) identify as 18 years of age or older, (b) identify as a first generation university student, and (c) identify as either a senior or recent graduate within the past two years. The study sample range for this research project included seven to ten first generation university students or recent graduates having graduated within the past 2 two years. The sample range was based upon a variety of criteria for achieving research saturation and includes the scope of the study, the anticipated quality of data, and the fact that participants were involved in multiple interviews (Morse, 2000). It is also important to note that this range falls into the scope established by Giorgi (2009) who indicates that it is recommended that a phenomenological study have a minimum of three participants and Englander (2012) who advocates for as few as five and as many as twenty participants.

**Participant Selection**

Having worked with a variety of students as both an instructor and as a professional advisor, the researcher identified several participants who served as informants for the study. Each informant experienced certain circumstances where he or she has exercised varying degrees of autonomy. These experiences have been witnessed by the researcher and include self-authorship in such contexts as the college classroom, university student extra-curriculum programming, and in the self-direction of personal life choices. While not only developing Dworkin’s (1988) concept of autonomy, these students have also persevered in their independent decisions to enroll, attend, and graduate from a public four year university. Exploring autonomy through their life experiences, has allowed the researcher to better understand the social construct of autonomy and view its potential influence on degree attainment.

This is significant when considering the phenomenological nature of the intended study, as it was necessary to “select participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied”
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 107). The study sought to explore the rich personal stories and experiences of overcoming adversity in the pursuit of a college degree by first generation university students, and initially the researcher identified fifteen potential informants. Using a purposeful sampling strategy the researcher has acknowledged participants who possess the rich knowledge and experience that will inform the study and answer the research questions. These participants represent a diverse section of first generation university students and include both male and female students, students of who identify across the socioeconomic continuum, as well as African-American, Latino, White, and physically challenged. As noted above, participant criteria included the following:

1.) Be at least 18 years of age.
2.) Identify as a first generation college student or recent graduate, where neither parent nor guardian has graduated college.
3.) Be within two (2) semesters of graduation for currently enrolled students or graduated within the last two (2) years.

The timeframe of one (1) year before and up to two (2) years after graduation will allow for greater memory recall and detail of pertinent information.

**Method for Data Collection**

The primary qualitative method that was employed in this study to gather data, which is informed by phenomenology, was face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 1995, Vagle, 2014). Giorgi (2009) explicates the preeminent status of interviewing for data collection when conducting phenomenological research. It is his position that the point of phenomenology is to resist the urge to move beyond what is present in the text (*description*) and instead, through analysis, understand the meaning of
the description. The significance of the interview is not observational, but rather through a reflective approach it seeks to understand the interactions of participants. This moves beyond a mere descriptive appreciation of the phenomena, autonomy, and seeks the meaning that is rooted in the everyday activities of participants, which in this case are first generation students (Garza, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). It is important to maintain a process that pursues a balance between utilizing the specified interview protocol while allowing participants to guide the discussion; thereby, providing rich detail that informs the proposed study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This form of data collection involves an active partnership with participants as established through a trustworthy connection and a responsive bond between researcher and participants (Creswell, 2003).

The interview process began with the researcher defining a clear understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, which was autonomy, as well as the understanding that one must reorient oneself to the phenomenon throughout the research process. The emphasis of the interview is to move the exchange into a “phenomenological attitude – to look at what we usually look through” (Vagle, 2014, p. 80). The informant must be encouraged to share his or her “experience of the phenomenon as lived, in the natural attitude” (p. 80). This approach allows the researcher to learn something significant about autonomy from each participant as a means of capturing the essence through the stories of all participants.

Participants took part in one (1) pre-interview meeting lasting approximately fifteen (15) to twenty (20) minutes and two (2) semi-structured interviews. Each interview would last approximately sixty (60) minutes and occurred at a time and location that was convenient to the participant, as well as the interviewer. The duration of each interview is based upon the
scholarship of Creswell (2007, 2009), in that a prolonged interview has the potential to decrease the meaning of the data due to participant fatigue.

Prior to interviewing, each participant reviewed and signed the informed consent form (see appendix A for more detail), as well as the opportunity for clarification or answers to questions concerning the study and the interview process. Before each individual interview, the informed consent form was reviewed with the participant and time was provided to answer questions that may have developed between meetings. The focus of each interview revolved around identifying and understanding the contexts that lead to autonomy and the potentiality of that construct contributing to academic success. Each interview was conducted in a systematic fashion with subsequent participants experiencing near identical interview protocols (Harvey-Jordan, & Long, 2001). During the interview and conversational phase the researcher experienced a level of prolonged engagement through causal dialogue via semi-structured interviewing in the natural setting of the university, which provided detailed and authentic communication (Flick, 2009).

**Data Stream – In-Depth Interviews**

According to Patton (1999, 2002), studies concerned with the complexity of cultural and emotional lived experiences require personal, in-depth interviews, as participants conscientiously share their experiences. Such interviews provide rich descriptions of an individual’s lived experiences by vividly opening each word to its intended meaning (Denzin, 1989). These detailed interviews are steeped within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and serve to expound upon the notion that the chosen method is informed by the stated methodology (Chilban, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).
The primary qualitative data collection strategy in this study was face-to-face semi-structured interviews, as this provides both guidance and flexibility through a spirit of collaboration between the researcher and participants (Harvey-Jordan, & Long, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The significance of the interview is not observational, but rather through a dialogical approach the researcher seeks to understand the lived experiences of autonomy through the exploration of students’ experiences, interpretations and interactions. In the tradition of phenomenology associated with Husserl (1936/1970) the interviews served as a means for the researcher to explore how participants both described and experienced autonomy through his or her senses.

In this instance, the decision to utilize semi-structured interviews as a primary means of data collection is based upon the philosophical assumptions attributed to phenomenology as the methodology of choice. Through a dialogical approach, participants revisit past experiences as they interpret the meaning that they themselves have conferred to the phenomenon of autonomy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Due to the nature of the proposed study, the depth and meaning that participants ascribe to his or her life experiences can only be captured through face-to-face, in-depth interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This exploration is accomplished as participants view his or her ascribed meaning to the concept of autonomy within the social context through which it occurred, and in this case is the college campus (Mischler, 1979).

**Interview Questions**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews, served as the primary means of data gathering for this study, as this particular approach provided a means to plunge deeper into the personal experiences of participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This process was reflective in nature as the researcher sought clarification through explicit examples from participants by the
application of active listening skills (Jasper, 1994). The interview protocol, which was comprised of predetermined semi-structured questions, provided the opportunity to further engage participants as new insight emerges from the dialogical nature of the interview, but also probes significant areas of exploration (Chilban, 1996; Harvey-Jordan, & Long, 2001).

As a means for establishing credible interview questions, the *Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being* (Ryff, 1989a; Ryff, 1989b) were reviewed as a theoretically grounded instrument that specifically focuses on measuring multiple facets of psychological well-being. In particular, interview questions were based upon the stated notion of autonomy, as described by Ryff, in both thought and action. According to Ryff, “a fully functioning person is also described as having an internal locus of evolution” (p.1071), not needing the acceptance or approval of others for action. Recall, that this description aligns with the previous discussions involving the self-authorship of autonomy as related to Dworkin (1988) and Rawls (1999). Further, the Ryff Scales acknowledge the need for such characteristics as “self-determination, independence, and the regulation of behavior from within” (p.1071), as traits of a fulfilled and autonomous person. While the Ryff scales are scientific in nature, holding to a quantitative survey, questions regarding autonomy were adapted to elicit a qualitative stream of data from participants.

**Interview Process**

Giorgi (1997) emphasizes the need to bracket “past knowledge” (p. 240) concerning the phenomenon under exploration. This does not denote a complete separation of knowledge, but rather Giorgi is insinuating that a phenomenologist must endeavor to put aside, as much as possible, judgments and understandings regarding the phenomenon of interest. The researcher must therefore bracket past understanding of autonomy and resist judging by avoiding leading questions (Creswell, 2007). When conducting interviews, the researcher established as
comfortable of an environment as possible, ensuring that each participant felt valued and appreciated (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This was accomplished through the use of participant mirroring and the use of positive non-verbal communication (Jasper, 1999). During the interview process the researcher will establish a sense of trustworthiness and credibility by relying upon Creswell’s (1998) recommendation to utilize verification procedures. After and during the initial interview, the researcher utilized member checks as a means of clarification, whereby reviewing the recorded data with each participant. In the event that a participant was vague in answering, probing questions were asked to garner a more robust response (Harvey-Jordan, & Long, 2001).

A digital recorder was used during the interview process for accuracy. The recorder as well as interview transcriptions, observations, and reflections of the process in the form of field notes, were stored on a password protected laptop computer secured in a locked file cabinet in the home of the researcher. Handwritten notes that were generated from interviews and reflections of the process were maintained in the home of the researcher in a locked personal cabinet with no other access (Creswell, 2007). All data, both raw and analyzed, will be maintained by the primary investigator for a period not to exceed three (3) years. The reason for the time frame is for the possibility of future publications or presentations based upon the research findings of the dissertation. Upon the completion of the specified time line, all collected, transcribed, and generated materials, whether digital or hardcopy, will be either permanently deleted or shredded and destroyed.

Any information provided by participants remained confidential throughout the dissertation process (Creswell, 1998). Participants were reminded that all participation is voluntary and that they may choose to withdraw with no consequences. Pseudonyms were used
during the transcription phase as well as a system of coding, which served to eliminate all possible identifiers within the data. As noted above, each interview was recorded using a digital audio recording device; however, before recording begins participants were asked for their individual consent. If consent had not been provided, qualitative interview techniques were employed as outlined by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) and Opdenakker (2006). These techniques included capturing the essence of the dialogue through note taking and recording key points, repeating what the participant states for clarity, documenting social cues, and recording significant quotes verbatim.

It is important to note that analysis begin immediately following each interview as the researcher took the time to reflect upon the interview experience (Etherington, 2004) and begin to digest the data through reflective writing outlining significant aspects (Glaser, 1992). This reflective activity created the opportunity to consider the interview experience and record the meaning as derived from the interactions with participants. Etherington also encourages maintaining an on-going reflective journal where personal assumptions are addressed throughout the process. This exercise also included specific approaches taken to data collection and analysis so that it will be possible to retrace the meaning making process of tracking emergent ideas. Further, this practice embodies reflexivity by creating a journal that considers the substance behind the understanding that is occurring from the data (Emmerson et al., 2011). Charmaz (2006) advocates this type of writing throughout the interview process as it allows the researcher to critically reflect upon the data, which plays a significant role in the qualitative data analysis.

Data Analysis

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) explain that “words are the way that most people come to understand their situations” (p. 18) as each person creates his or her world through words. As
such, through the phenomenological position of qualitative inquiry, words utilized by first
generation university students will be analyzed to explore autonomy. It is Corbin (1986) who
described the data analysis phase as the “nitty-gritty of qualitative research” (p. 91), in that
fundamental details are brought to life. As with most qualitative research designs, the data
collection and analysis are intimately connected in this dissertation.

As this dissertation assumed a descriptive phenomenological approach, the data analysis
phase incorporated a six-step process as chronicled in Vagle’s (2014) text. It is important to note
that the footings of this stage embraced a focus on the “whole-parts-whole process” (p. 98)
analysis with a consideration on the intentionality of participant experience. The six steps of the
analysis include: (1) holistic reading of the entire text, (2) first line-by-line reading, (3) follow up
questions, (4) second line-by-line reading, (5) third line-byline reading, (6) subsequent readings
(p. 98-99). The strength of using this specific process is that it offers a fairly simple guide for
phenomenological research data analysis, yet it remains flexible enough to allow the “creativity
necessary to craft a high-amplitude” (p. 98) text that moves beyond coding.

Holistic Reading of the Entire Text

In the initial step, the researcher reads the entirety of the collected data, which will
include the interview transcription and reflective journal. Giorgi (2009) describes this as
developing a sense of the whole in an attempt to understand the full description. This step also
allows the researcher to become “reacquainted with the data” without taking notes and sets the
stage for subsequent steps (Vagle, 2014, p. 98).

First Line-by-Line Reading

In the second step of the data analysis phase the researcher will engage in a thorough
line-by-line reading with detailed notes that indicate the appearance of “initial meanings” (Vagle,
This step incorporates a more tactile approach, as the researcher will begin identifying “chunks of text” (p. 98) within the margins that contribute to questions that lead to understanding. This also aligns with Giorgi’s (2009) search for “meaning units” (p. 130).

**Follow-Up Questions**

Vagle (2014) describes this step as the opportunity to “craft follow-up questions for each participant” (p. 99) having previously completed the initial two steps. This process includes reviewing margin notes and reflective journals to seek clarification of the units of meaning regarding the phenomenon of autonomy in subsequent interviews.

**Second Line-by-Line Reading**

This step involves a second reading of the collected data in the form of the first and second interview transcriptions along with notes and journals. Following Vagle (2014), this step will include the copying and pasting of a participant’s “identified excerpts or parts of their transcription” (p. 99) into an individualized document. These sections are based upon the researcher’s understanding of how the excerpts “might contribute to the phenomenological text (p. 99).

**Third Line-by-Line Reading**

This step will involve the articulation of the “analytic thoughts” concerning each rendering from the previous step (Vagle, 2014, p. 99). In this stage, the researcher examines the abstract separation of the whole data into its essential parts exploring the relation between each. This will continue until all data has been analyzed and the researcher has “articulated the analytic thoughts for each part for each participant” (p. 99).
Subsequent Readings

In this stage of the analysis, the researcher engages in reading “across individual participant’s data, with the goal of looking for what…Giorgi [would refer to as] ‘meaning units’ and then ‘invariant structures’” (Vagle, 2014, p. 99). As these emerge from the data, the researcher will ascribe “preliminary titles” (p. 99). These titles, as viewed through Giorgi’s (2009) lens offers a depiction of the lived experience of a phenomenon in terms of the conscious moments of the individual’s experience.

**Figure 1. 6 Steps of the Data Analysis Process**

**Qualitative Data Analysis Software**

The use of qualitative analysis software was initially utilized in this dissertation as a means for organizing and examining data. Creswell (2007) advocates the use of such software in order to produce a more comprehensive study, and NVivo for Mac, version 10.1.3, was purchased and employed as a response to the extensive data collection. However, through the analysis phase, a sense of separate manifest itself between the researcher and the data, which
caused a perceived loss of connection with the stories of each participant. As such, NVivo was utilized in the transcription phases of the research, but in agreement with Fielding and Lee (1998), it was not used as a means of drawing conclusions from the data.

**Quality Criteria**

Qualitative research offers the social sciences a wealth of knowledge as gleaned through the shared experiences of researcher and participant. As with any quality qualitative research proposal the plan should exist in such a way as to satiate the critical lens of the skeptical reader. With the unique and naturalistic disposition of qualitative inquiry, it is not advantageous to utilize the traditionally established criteria ascribed to quantitative research for assessment. The traditionally held assessments of reliability and validity, inherent to quantitative research, simply lack the ability to fit the particulars of qualitative inquiry (Agar, 1986). Therefore, to ensure that this proposed research dissertation is both rigorous and of the highest standard, it is important to address the trustworthiness of the proposed study by utilizing the alternative criteria for assessment in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and neutrality (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

**Trustworthiness**

As the appropriateness of assessment is contingent upon the nature of the research design, it is important to determine a model of trustworthiness that embraces the plurality of qualitative inquiry. To that end, Guba’s (1981) Model of Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research has been selected as a means for strengthening, bounding, and increasing the rigor of my proposed study. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), trustworthiness addresses the argument that the findings of qualitative inquiry are worthy of consideration. In essence, trustworthiness addresses the inferences and results of the research as being reasonable and worthy of significance. The
challenge then becomes one of language and best fit, as the quality of findings is a necessity regardless of the research paradigm (Agar, 1986).

Guba’s Model (1981) ascribes four primary aspects of trustworthiness to both the quantitative (scientific) and qualitative (naturalistic) research endeavor, which include *truth-value*, *applicability*, *consistency*, and *neutrality* (pp. 79-80). Each of the stated aspects of trustworthiness is pertinent to either quantitative or qualitative inquiry based upon the theoretical assumptions and differences of design. Truth-value considers the internal validity of a quantitative study and the credibility of a qualitative study. Applicability considers the external validity and generalizability in a quantitative design, while considering the transferability of a qualitative design. Consistency addresses the reliability of a quantitative design, while addressing dependability in a qualitative design. Finally, neutrality addresses objectivity in a quantitative study, while addressing confirmability in a qualitative study (Refer to Table 1). The strategies utilized to assess these aspects ensure the highest level of rigor and thus strengthen the findings of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Quantitative Terminology</th>
<th>Qualitative Terminology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth Value</td>
<td><em>Internal Validity</em></td>
<td><em>Credibility</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td><em>External Validity</em></td>
<td><em>Transferability</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Generalizability</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td><em>Reliability</em></td>
<td><em>Dependability</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td><em>Objectivity</em></td>
<td><em>Confirmability</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Truth Value**

In brief, the truth-value addresses the level of research confidence as gleaned from the lived experiences of the participants within the context of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The truth-value is often referred to as credibility, which establishes the confidence of the researcher in the accuracy and truth of the finding. This is accomplished as I reflect upon the findings, as established though my choice of research design, population sample, and location, which is deemed *credible* when the findings portray an accurate interpretation of those experiences. Further, through my prolonged engagement of multiple interviews, the use of critical friends, and collaboration with participants the findings will be strengthened and thus credible. Through the use of member checks (Creswell, 2007), I will ensure that gathered data accurately captures and reflects what the participant intended to communicate (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, I will test my initial understanding of that data through participant debriefing, which will occur immediately after each interview (Koelsch, 2013). To further strengthen my findings, I have also relied upon the application of what Stake (2010) terms the use of “critical friends” (p. 128). In this application, I shared sections of the collected data with a fellow doctoral candidate along with my analysis to ensure that I was seeing what was actually being portrayed.

**Applicability**

In a qualitative research design, unfolding where the phenomena occur naturally, applicability refers to the goodness of fit in relation to the transferability of the study to an alternative, yet similar context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the phenomena are unconditionally tied to the specific times and conditions in which they are experienced, applicability is not an acceptable criteria of rigor in phenomenological research (Guba, 1981). Rather, through the
development of a conceptual description it is possible to develop an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It is this description that could potentially allow someone to reach similar conclusions

**Consistency**

Consistency focuses on the results as established through the use of stable and credible instrumentation. According to Guba (1981), this aspect becomes problematic for the qualitative researcher, as there exist multiple realities viewed through fallible human perceptions that range from simple fatigue to the development of human insight. Therefore, the researcher will view consistency in terms of dependability that incorporate the concept of explaining variations that may occur in the instrumentation via variability. This is accomplished via a dependability audit that explores the final research report as well as the process used to collect, analyze, and interpretations of the data, which corroborates the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Neutrality**

The final aspect of trustworthiness is that of neutrality, where the biases and preconceived perspectives are bracketed, as much as possible, to allow the voice of the participants to inform the findings (Guba, 1981). To accomplish this I utilized the traditional two-pronged approach of phenomenological reduction, as indicated by Giorgi (1985, 2009). This will occur as I have, (1) endeavored to bracket past experiences, and (2) I have taken each event, as depicted by each participant, to be what it appears to be without claiming that their interaction with the phenomenon was more than it appeared to be. This will be accomplished by establishing confirmability of the data through the corroborating of both truth-value and applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have followed the guidance of Giorgi and embraced the phenomenological reduction mentality.
Role of the Researcher and Qualifications

The researcher possesses an innate interest in understanding how first generation university students make meaning of their experiences with autonomy while enrolled. This interest is based upon what the researcher views as an inexcusable loss of human capital through college student attrition. It is this personal investment of seeking to understand the phenomenon of autonomy as a potential curative that justifies the research strategy of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). As a former secondary English teacher and coach, as well as a postsecondary instructor and advisor, the researcher has developed a fascination of student development and an appreciation of the challenges facing first generation students as they seek to fulfill the goal of a college degree.

As a doctoral student the researcher has successfully designed and implemented two previous qualitatively driven research projects, both under the supervision of a faculty advisor. Having successfully completed graduate level courses in qualitative research, mixed method research, research methodology, statistical methodology, and research colloquium the researcher has a scholarly foundation from which to draw upon to ethically and rigorously conduct this proposed study. The researcher also identifies as a first generation university student and believes that the unique experiences associated as such serves to enhance his awareness and sensitivity to the phenomenon being explored in this proposed study. Further, these experiences will support the dialogical nature of the research and foster the necessary rapport with participants.

According to van Manen (2001), the researcher must remain open and sensitive to the phenomenon being studied, especially in relation to the length and depth of engagement. Vagle (2014) acknowledges the “technique of bracketing…[which] stems from Husserl’s philosophical
notion of phenomenological reduction” (p. 66), as a means of remaining open and free of bias. Moustakas (1994) underscores this technique as a way of suspending assumptions and “biases of everyday knowledge as a basis for truth and reality” (p. 85). This will be accomplished as the researcher discloses his assumptions and experiences, as a first generation university student, regarding autonomy and reflect upon that knowledge to remain free of its influence (Creswell, 2007). These beliefs will remain ever-present, yet separate, throughout the research project to ensure that only the voices of the participants are guiding the dissertation and that he has bracketed “the world and all the things in the world” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 49).

**Ethical Considerations**

The risks and discomfort associated with participation in this study are no greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Nevertheless, when engaging in qualitative inquiry, the researcher must anticipate ethical issues that may arise (Creswell, 2009). The overall experience is expected to be informative and generally positive in nature. The primary benefit of participation in this study is reflective in nature. For current students, participation allows individuals the opportunity to discuss their experiences and gain an understanding of the events that helped to support persistence of the academic journey. For recent graduates, participants are presented with the opportunity to consider the conditions and characteristics that contributed to the ability to persist and complete a rigorous course of study. This reflection has the potential to elucidate strengths that would be beneficial during the search for meaningful employment, as indicated via cover letters and interviews.

In an effort to ensure that there would exist only a modicum of risk or discomfort, approval was secured from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to participant contact. Further, each participant will be provided detailed information concerning the study, an informed
consent form will be reviewed and signed by all participants, and verbal consent will be obtained prior to each interview session. Further, each participant will acknowledge that participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw, unconditionally, at any point during the process without fear of reprisal.

Timeline

With the approval of the doctoral committee, initial interviews were conducted during the months of December 2014 and January 2015. After initial interviews were completed, data analysis commenced and remained ongoing throughout the research process. Follow up interviews were conducted during the months of January 2015 and February 2015. Analysis continued with constant communication with my doctoral committee chair and in conjunction with two critical friends (Stake, 2010), who supported my interpretations. Research findings, discussion, and conclusion were provided to my doctoral committee in May 2015.
Chapter Four: Findings

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO PERSIST

In this qualitative study, I sought to explore how first generation university students and recent graduates make meaning of their autonomous journey of attaining an undergraduate degree. It was my intention to better understand how study participants experienced autonomy and view that experience in relation to academic persistence and degree attainment. As a first generation university graduate, it is my hope that this study would be utilized for purposes of improving the rates of student retention and the persistence of first generation students through the application of an autonomy-appreciating academic environment. Having presented the problem of student attrition as well as an exploration of the various conceptions of autonomy in chapter 2, and discussing the research methodology in chapter 3, I will now share the research findings in chapter 4. In the end, I believe that it is possible to improve the rates of academic persistence through an enriched understanding of how first generation university students develop and foster autonomy, as a means of influencing degree attainment.

Before the presentation of data contained in chapter four, I will begin with a review of the purpose behind this study, along with the primary research question, and the three additional subclass research questions. From there I will introduce the seven participants including demographics, of whom three (3) are recent university graduates, two (2) are current university seniors, and two (2) are current university juniors. This chapter then briefly reviews the interview process, techniques for bracketing, and steps of analysis, all of which are covered in more detail in chapter three. An exposé of the autonomous experience of each participant is then
rendered, which denotes quotes that support the descriptions of participant experiences. This is ultimately followed by a description of the data analysis that supports the emergence of themes, which are further corroborated by quotations and the rich descriptions of the shared experiences of study participants. This process yielded six themes which include: A Sense of Purpose, Self-Reflection, Internal Locus of Control, Resisting Conformity, Perseverance, Uniqueness of Being First Generation.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the awareness and fostering of autonomy as experienced by first generation university undergraduates and recent graduates at a midsized Midwest public university. This understanding has allowed me to view its potential influence on the academic persistence of my participants, as they journeyed through the complex system of higher education. Employing the descriptive tradition of phenomenology (Girogi, 2009; Husserl, 1970/1936; Vagle, 2014), and building upon theories of student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993) and learner autonomy (Holec, 1981), this study has yielded knowledge concerning the conditions that contribute to and further extend my understanding of how autonomy influences college persistence. This has generated a new perspective on degree attainment by furthering the literature beyond learner autonomy and course success, to individual autonomy and degree attainment.

**Research Questions**

The subsequent data analysis was performed with the intention of addressing the following primary question, which also served as a guide for the exploration of the research:

*How is autonomy experienced by first-generation university undergraduate students, or recent*
graduates, and do those experiences influence academic persistence? In the quest to address the guiding question, the following research questions were satisfied:

1. **How do first generation university students experience autonomy regarding the decision to attend an institution of higher learning?**

2. **How do first generation university students define the nature and conditions of autonomy development?**

3. **How do first generation university students experience autonomy in relation to academic persistence?**

My understanding was established through the stories of the lived experiences of my participants through the identification of themes, which illuminate participant autonomy as it was experienced.

**Introduction to the Participants**

As discussed previously, this study was designed to explore the lived experiences of first generation university students as well as recent graduates in relation to autonomy and college persistence. A phenomenological approach was assumed as the most appropriate design for exploring the experiences of each participant. A purposeful sampling design was utilized as a means of selecting participants “who have experienced the phenomenon being studied”, which is in this instance is autonomy (Moustakas, 1994, p. 107).

Therefore, I recruited a total of ten potential participants with whom I am familiar through our shared involvement at the study location. Each informant was invited to participate in my study via an email request (appendix A), as they possessed the experience that I sought to explore. Of the ten potential participants, seven agreed to be involved in the study. As this number fell within my study parameters I felt comfortable in beginning the study with the
understanding that I would recruit additional participants should I need to further explore the phenomenon of autonomy. All participants identified as first generation college students and ranged in age from twenty-two (22) to sixty-one (61). There were a total of four (4) females and three (3) males representing European-American / Caucasian, African-American, second-generation Taiwan-American, and first-generation Indian-American. Pseudonyms were used for each participant to help protect anonymity. Academic majors represented include: International Business, Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Social Studies Education, Theater, and Computer Science. Refer to table 2 for specific participant demographic data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic Status</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
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</thead>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>University Junior</td>
<td>International Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>University Graduate May 2014</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>European/American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>University Senior</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Taiwan/American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>University Graduate May 2014</td>
<td>Social Studies Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>African/American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>University Junior</td>
<td>Theater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>University Senior</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>European/American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>University Graduate May 2014</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anita is a twenty-two year old first generation university junior majoring in International Business with minors in both French and Logistics. She is actively involved in the academic community, holding various positions that range from being the freshman representative on the Student Government Association (SGA) to Resident Advisor (RA), and is slated to run for SGA Vice President during the next election cycle. Anita emigrated to the United States with her family from the south of India in the late 1990’s, and now calls the metropolitan area of Chicago home. She has one sibling, an older brother, and lives in close contact with a myriad of aunts, uncles, and cousins. She considers her socioeconomic status (SES) to be middleclass and strives to not only better her station in life, but also contribute to the well being of others. Anita believes that she will be successful “even if I fail [at] the first”.

Brianna is a twenty-eight year old white, first generation university graduate who majored in Early Childhood Education (ECE). She is a graduate student in Elementary Education and aspires to pursue a doctorate, also, in Elementary Education. Her first experience in higher education resulted in a premature departure, as she dropped out due to failing grades. During her successful reenrollment in undergraduate study, Brianna was a commuter student and acknowledges a distinct “separation” between herself, her peers, and the institution. She has a husband of six years and is currently in the process of adopting her niece and nephew, both of whom are considered special needs children. While Brianna considers her family to have an SES of middleclass, she was born into poverty and remains deeply committed to supporting those from low SES backgrounds.
Carline

Carline is a twenty-two year old white, first generation university senior majoring in Elementary Education where she is specializing in Counseling Psychology and minoring in Interpersonal Relations. She originally began her academic career at a smaller state institution where she nearly “failed out” before transferring to the current study location. She is committed to improving education for all students, and holds a special place in her heart for working with disadvantaged children. Carline grew up in a single parent home with three younger siblings where they were “poor, but never knew it”, and considers herself fortunate to have the opportunity to pursue a college degree.

Erik

Erik is a twenty-three year old second-generation Taiwanese-American and first generation university graduate. Erik graduated with a secondary teaching license and a degree in Social Studies Education. He is currently teaching grades seven and eight in a prestigious and highly coveted school district. While pursuing his undergraduate education, Erik fondly recalls his experiences and firmly believes that college is a necessity for the continuation of a strong society. He is the only child of a middle SES immigrant family, and once settled, has plans of pursuing an advanced degree in school administration. He admits that some of his college success is due to his attendance at a high school “where the question isn't, ‘are you going to college?’ It's, ‘where are you going to college’”.

James

James is a twenty-four year old African-American, first generation university junior who is majoring in Theater, with a minor in Food Management. Originally from New York City, James and his family moved to Atlanta, Georgia during his early teen years. He and his family
currently own a successful restaurant and catering business in downtown Atlanta. He considers himself part of the middle SES, but recognizes the financial struggles endured by his family throughout his formative years. James exudes passion, power, and pride, while acknowledging his difficult upbringing with a physical disability in the form of an under-developed right arm. He has three older siblings, all brothers, and remains very close to his extended family. James is actively involved in what he calls the “college experience in the bubble”, and is an impassioned activist for social change. He has been an identifiable leader on campus since his freshman year and is officially recognized as the president of a university student group.

**Martin**

Martin is a twenty-one year old white, first generation university senior with the dual majors of Computer Science and Technology Education. His future aspirations include both advanced and terminal degrees in computer and information science where he seeks to become the sole proprietor of a software company. His inquisitive nature has led him to conclude, “the more I learn…the more I think I know…the more I am certain that I have a lot to learn”. This philosophical senior appreciates the opportunity to attend university, but upholds the notion that “college isn’t for everyone”. He self-identifies as being in the middle SES, yet strives to reach the point where he has secured “not only what I need, but what I want” in life.

**Miranda**

Miranda is a sixty-one year old white, first generation university graduate who majored in Elementary Education. While initially dropping out of college due to academic failings, Miranda sought ways to improve her skills and practices as a substitute teacher and returned to graduate with distinction. Throughout her academic journey, Miranda’s perseverance would shine through as she repeatedly told herself, “this is what I am supposed to do. This is what I need to
do”. Miranda has a daughter who will be graduating from college in the near future, and a husband who relentlessly supported her decision to pursue a college education. She identifies as middle SES, and acknowledges her humble beginnings as a working class family.

**The Interview Process**

As stated previously, a purposeful sampling design was utilized to secure seven participants who are eighteen (18) years of age and older who identified as either a first generation university student or recent graduate. These participants were selected, purposefully, as this study has focused on a depth of understanding. The point of saturation was reached with seven participants, as no new information was forthcoming (Creswell, 2009; Girogi, 2009). The criteria for reaching the point of saturation included: 1) I established an understanding of the essence of autonomy from the experiences of my participants, 2) redundancy of description occurred, and 3) no additional description or experience from the perspective of each participant was forthcoming. The dynamics of the sample size and selection were influenced by such considerations as, the “quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, [and] the amount of useful information obtained from each participant” as outlined by Morse (2000, p. 3).

The primary qualitative method employed in this study for gathering data, which is informed by phenomenology, was face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001; Vagle, 2014). As noted by Giorgi (2009) interviewing for data collection when conducting phenomenological research is the preferred method. As a means of reestablishing rapport between participants and myself, a pre-interview meeting was established at a location and time that best suited the needs of both parties. This initial conference lasted ten (10) to twenty (20) minutes and included: (1) overview of the study; (2) an overview of the participant’s role; (3) an overview of the researcher’s role; (4) an overview of the informed
consent form; and (5) time for questions, and casual conversation. At the conclusion of the initial meeting we established a date, time, and location for the first interview.

As a means of reducing participant anxiety and in an attempt to promote the dialogical nature of the interview, I decided to first gather demographic information during the initial interview. Data gathered during this phase of the collection process included age, ethnicity, gender, academic status, and academic major. The initial round of interviews ranged from forty-five (45) to eighty-five (85) minutes with the subsequent round of interviews lasting between twenty-five (25) to forty-five (45) minutes. Throughout the interview process, I remained aware of time commitments ensuring that participants were not growing fatigued with the exchange (Creswell, 2009). While a semi-structured interview protocol was developed (appendix C), the exchange remained open and flexible to allow each participant to fully share his or her experiences with autonomy (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Vagle (2014) advocates treating each interview as an opportunity to “potentially learn something important about the phenomenon” (p. 79). Therefore, it is “not necessary, nor even desirable to ask the same questions in the same way” (p. 79). For me, I simply sought to learn as much as possible about participant experiences with autonomy and allowed the exchange to remain flexible and authentic.

While the interview process began with my critical reflections concerning how I made meaning of autonomy through my past experiences, I found that I needed to constantly return to the stated research questions. I did this as a means of reorienting myself to the phenomenon within the context of the study. This daily exercise provided me with a means of remaining cognizant of my prejudices and preconceived ideas, thus suspending, as much as possible, the restrictive lens of my biases (Vagle, 2014). It was important that I used the research questions as guides for discovery, yet even more important was the concept that I remained open to the lived
experiences of my participants and the data as presented. By this, I was able to avoid approaching the study with a fixed understanding of autonomy, and instead allowed the experiences of my participants to inform and transform my understanding (Freeman, 2011).

For example, early in the data gathering and analysis phase, I began to identify units of meaning that lead me to initially articulate a theme that I entitled, *a sense of destiny*. As more units of meaning were intuitively placed in the growing body of the ascribed theme, I remained open to what the data was communicating and *a sense of destiny* was no longer appropriate. Instead, participants described that his or her postsecondary pursuits were not *destined* to occur, thus implying a greater design; rather, they described an internal desire to fulfill a *sense of purpose* as part of the journey. I was able to reach this supposition based upon an open posture, which allowed unanticipated meaning to emerge (Giorgi, 2011).

Also, following the guidance of Giorgi (1985, 2009), I assumed a disciplinary perspective of an educational foundations scholar within the phenomenological perspective. It is his contention that phenomenological research requires a disciplinary aspect in order to remain sensitive and open to the data. I have pursued the study of autonomy, as experienced by first generation university students, with the intent of better understanding its implications within the field of higher education. As such, assuming an educational foundations perspective allowed me to remain open to the experiences of first generation students in terms of (1) recognizing the significance of this important student subgroup, (2) exploring the development and exercise of autonomy of first generation students, and (3) grounding my understanding of autonomy within the field of education (learner autonomy) and higher education (degree attainment). Otherwise, my investigation of autonomy could potentially become too broad and inadvertently become lost in concepts such as moral, political, or economical autonomy.
With the phenomenological attitude assumed, the interview was then able to move the exchange into a perspective that allows me to “look at what we usually look through” (Vagle, 2014, p. 80). Each participant was encouraged to share his or her “experience of the phenomenon as lived, in the natural attitude” (p. 80). This approach allowed me to learn something significant about autonomy from each participant during each interview, as a means of capturing the essence through the stories of all participants. Throughout the interview process I utilized the technique of bracketing any preconceived notions so that I could remain conscious of my openness to the utterances of my participants as a means of probing the “lived, felt, sensed nature(s) of the phenomenon” (Vagle, 2014, p. 83). I will now discuss bracketing as part of the phenomenological reduction process.

**Phenomenological Reduction**

As it pertains to phenomenological reduction, some scholars such as Giorgi (1985, 1997, 2009) insist that to follow Husserl (1983) one must submit to this standard as a means of ensuring a rigorous study. Others have begun to disentangle themselves from this limiting perspective (Dahlberg, 2006; Finlay, 2013; Vagle, 2014) offering up variations of suspending the influence of bias. For the purpose of this study, I have followed the guidance of Giorgi and embraced the phenomenological reduction mentality. To that end, I have utilized the traditional two-pronged approach of reduction in that I have, (1) endeavored to bracket past experiences, and (2) I have taken each event, as depicted by each participant, to be what it appears to be without claiming that their interaction with the phenomenon was more than it appeared to be. By engaging in this rich phenomenological tradition, I have in essence limited my findings to the way the phenomenon was experienced by each participant as opposed to the reality of that experience.
The first step in phenomenological reduction, that I wish to briefly explore, is bracketing. While confronting the issue of validity remains an ever-present concern during the research process, especially in relation to the prolonged exposure required of phenomenological study (Dahlberg, 2008), I have used bracketing to buttress the quality of my dissertation. In this I assumed an attitudinal shift as I take on the phenomenological mindset of bracketing. Like Girogi (1997) I do not seek to remove past knowledge, as this is not entirely possible; however, more accurately, I seek to bracket that understanding so as to remain open to the experiences established by my participants. For me, this phenomenological technique is useful, as I desire to explore how it is that my participants possess the ability to describe autonomy as well as the manner in which it was experienced. To hold my preconceptions unchecked, especially in light of the fact that I, too, am a first generation university graduate, would undermine the results of my study.

To engage in bracketing, I first needed to acknowledge my biases and past knowledge regarding autonomy and first generation university students. To do this, I answered my subset research questions before attempting to gather data. Through my acknowledgement of previously held bias, I was then able to set aside, as much as possible, these preconceived ideas and remain open to the actual experience of each participant as it was described. This was an ongoing endeavor, where I returned to my collected answers throughout the course of the study. A recorded synthesis of my responses follow:

1. How do first generation university students experience autonomy regarding the decision to attend an institution of higher learning? As a first generation college student, it was a journey that I took alone. I recall my earliest years growing up on a pig farm in rural Mississippi having no exposure to education beyond the secondary level. The decision to
go to college was not initially influenced by my family. I had assumed that I would not
go to college and would rather work on the family farm. As time progressed, our
circumstances changed and college became an option. I held beliefs that all first
generation students would face familial adversity when it came to the decision to attend
college. I acknowledged a bias that the decision to attend college would be birthed by the
individual and that he or she would face significant obstacles to enrollment.

2. How do first generation university students define the nature and conditions of autonomy
development? I believed that the individual student would define autonomy, as the ability
to do what they think is best based upon the direction that they themselves determine. I
held a preconceived notion that autonomy was a condition that first generation students
developed leading up to the decision to attend college and then refined during the college
experience. It was my belief that this would occur through trial and strife.

3. How do first generation university students experience autonomy in relation to academic
persistence? I held a belief that first generation students would not connect autonomy
with academic persistence and degree attainment. I held a bias that first generation
students would be unable to articulate autonomy and its influence on the decisions to
attend and ultimately graduate from college.

The second aspect of embracing the proper phenomenological attitudinal perspective is that
of reduction (Giorgi, 1997). Unlike the meaning that comes to mind when we generally use the
term reduction, it means something entirely different under this philosophical assumption. In
phenomenological research it is a “procedure designed to return us to [an] experience as it is
experienced…[to] capture [the] lived experience” of our participants (Keene, 1975, p. 39). In the
most rudimentary language possible, reduction means that I give equal weight and consideration
to the units of meaning and that they are taken as they present themselves to be (Giorgi, 2009). Consider for a moment that participants in this study communicated that they are “doing what I’m supposed to do” or that “I was meant to be here”. I had to resist the urge to define the meaning of “supposed to” and “meant to” and instead consider the aspects of this language in the context of its depiction. By reduction, I was required to more fully understand “supposed to” and “meant to”, as presented by participants, before I could acknowledge its existence.

**Steps of Analysis**

In this section I will review the analysis process and provide examples of how I engaged in each step. Through a sifting of the gathered data a total of six central themes emerged as “they presented themselves to the consciousness of the researcher” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130-131). The sifting process, or data analysis, used for this research study is one taken from Vagle (2014) incorporating the following six-step process (*as outlined in chapter three*: holistic reading of the entire text, first line-by-line reading, follow-up questions, second line-by-line reading, third line-by-line reading, and subsequent readings (p. 98-99). It is important to note that this approach, while rather simplistic, is in agreement with Vagle that “some guidance is good, but too much can stultify the creativity necessary to craft high-amplitude phenomenological texts” (p. 98).

The first step, which is a holistic reading of the experience, served to provide me with an all-inclusive perspective of the data. I accomplished this by reading the transcripts multiple times before listening to the audio in conjunction with reading the transcripts. I completed this step many times, without taking notes, so as to become reacquainted with the gathered data. This initial step was a critical starting point for reengaging with the disposition of each interview through the interview process.
The second step, an initial line-by-line reading, is where I began to seek initial meanings within the text. During this phase, I began making preliminary notations on the transcription itself including brackets and asterisks denoting potential units of meaning. These units were accompanied by speculation and questions written within the margin concerning the experience of autonomy as described by the participant. These units of meaning included language and situations that, in my opinion, required additional exploration (Vagle, 2014). It was during this phase where I found myself writing in a reflective journal concerning my experiences with the data, as well as revisiting my answers to the research questions to bolster my sense of bracketing. For example, here is a unit of meaning that needed further examination from my initial interview with Martin:

P: I still have a master's and a doctorate to get and in that time I will once again double up on the development of who I am and at a much deeper level figure out what I do and do not want to know…how to develop that and integrate it into life. I have a long way to go in my opinion. A lot of people don't feel that way. Most people are done in high school or during high school. Same thing happens in college. What do I want to do? I don't know. Learn a lot…continue learning a lot. Understand the world and things beyond the world.

As I read this section, Martin’s language and description stood out as significant and I found it necessary to dig deeper into this block of text. Returning to my reflective journal, I began a dialogue of exploration, as I believed this to indicate an expression of autonomous behavior. The following is an excerpt of my thoughts:

To question “who I am” and then to consider “what I do and do not want to know” seems to me to be central to the idea of self-direction…autonomy…freedom to choose. Martin considers his plight in relation to others as evidenced by those “in high school or during high school. Same thing in college”. This is self-reflection. He seeks to better “Understand the world and things beyond the world”. Introspection.

Through this process, we see that Martin states that he has a desire to learn more and develop himself through the acquisition of both a master’s and doctoral degree. However, this
unit of meaning moves beyond his expression as he describes his educational experience through pondering, philosophically, the value of knowledge. He described his desire to understand his existence in the world and beyond. As I spent time reflecting upon this unit of meaning, I began to loosely ascribe the idea of self-reflection and introspection to this unit.

The third step, follow up questioning in the second interview, occurred after I had reviewed each transcript along with margin notes and my reflective journal, and then created questions to better understand the potential meaning ascribe to the initial units. This aspect was crucial in ascertaining whether or not I was being provided access to the lived experience of autonomy. As Vagle (2014) states, “The questions should be designed to clarify intentional meanings that one predicts, at the early stages of analysis” (p. 99). For example, with Martin I posed the following question concerning the above-indicated unit of meaning:

**Interviewer:** What does it feel like to “figure out” for yourself what you “do and not want to know” as a college student?

**Martin:** I’m not stuck in the game that so many students play. I know that there is more to learn than I can learn. I'm learning it for the sake of learning it and not for the sake of using it. I want to use everything that I know someday...maybe somehow...but at the same time I am here right now because I want to learn as much as I possibly can. Or learn how much I don't know. I always struggle when I learn something and then wrack my brains with the understanding that there is just so much that I don't know. I’m here for me. I feel like I am beholden to nobody but myself. It may be college, and I do have to follow some rules...but it makes me feel free.

From this point, I continued on to steps four and five, which incorporated additional line-by-line readings. It was during step four where I began to engage my kinesthetic nature to physically manipulate the gathered data and emerging units of meaning. As I returned to read the text, I began to “articulate meanings based on the markings, margin notes, and the follow-up” (Vagle, 2014, p. 99). This articulation occurred as I physically cut out sections of the text and attached them to posters that I had created to represent each participant. The result was a
montage of excerpts, attributed to each individual participant, that I felt would “contribute to the phenomenological text” (p. 99). Step five involved yet another line-by-line reading that contributed to my critical understanding of the descriptions as presented by each participant. These steps run parallel to Husserl’s (1983) and Giorgi’s (1997) depiction of employing imaginative variation. Similarly, I, too, used intuition and imagination to determine the essential aspects of the phenomenon as experienced by my participants to determine which attributes informed my understanding.

Step six, subsequent readings, involved a true synthesis of my participant data. In this highly creative, yet analytic, phase I began reading across the data seeking what Vagle (2014) terms “tentative manifestations” (p. 99), or what is more often referred to in qualitative research as themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It’s important to draw a connection to this step and Giorgi’s (2009) conceptual structure. These manifestations developed as similar descriptions and experiences emerged, thus creating what Vagle refers to as a type of dialogue between participants. During this phase, I witnessed the emergence of multiple themes as well as the evolution of some (as indicated earlier), while others were dismissed altogether. For example, early in the analysis phase I began to see the reoccurrence of the concept of support in the data, which I initially entitled external support. This concept began to appear and embodied elements of encouragement from both family and friends. James described it in terms of “I come from a supportive home environment” and “you know, my brothers got my back”. Carline also described how her longtime boy friend was important to her journey, “I just felt like his support with college was the best…”. As I progressed through the data analysis stage, this concept was not seen across the descriptions of all participants and in the end was overshadowed by descriptions of perseverance. Another example was that I had initially begun to identify a theme
entitled *risk taking*, which involved units of meaning concerning aspects of financial and familial risks of attending postsecondary education. However, through the analytical process, this “working title” morphed into the theme of *uniqueness of being first generation*, which embodied more than simply taking risks.

Again, remaining true to my kinesthetic approach to knowledge and learning, I began color-coding excerpts that shared similar meaning through the use of highlighters to designate the connections. It was in this final stage of analysis where participant descriptions entered into a discourse, of sorts, with one another affirming themes and collectively illustrating the essence of autonomy, as experienced by these first generation university students.

**The Emergence of Themes**

As I engaged with the data, carefully examining the descriptions as offered by participants while reviewing notes and analytical reflections, I began to see that while each individual participant experienced autonomy from a unique perspective, they also shared qualitative attributes leading to the emergence of six themes. With the support of two critical friends, who viewed selected portions of participant descriptions and confirmed my findings, I was able to distill the collected data into distinctive attributes (Stake, 2010). The resulting six themes, *a sense of purpose, self-reflection, internal locus of control, resisting conformity, perseverance, and uniqueness of being first generation*, were brought to life through the phenomenological analysis listed above and were experienced by the entire group of participants. In the following six sections I will describe my study participants, seven first generation university students, experienced autonomy in relation to their educational journey through higher education (Moustakas, 1994).
A Sense of Purpose

Each of the seven participants experienced autonomy through a sense of purpose in relation to the enrollment and subsequent academic attainment of his or her educational degree. Participants described their autonomous experiences within higher education, as meeting or developing their full potential through the academic journey. As the first structure to emerge in my study and deserving of its preeminent position in the findings, living out one’s potential through the realization of the individual’s perceived purpose, is a foundational element of fostering autonomy. Each participant described his or her experience of being a first generation university graduate as an accomplishment that was predicated upon his or her individual decisions and effort to fulfill those decisions. Throughout the interview process, attending university was described by participants in terms of, “this is what I am supposed to do”, “this is what I was meant to do”, or “this is what I need to do” as a means of fulfilling one’s pursuits.

Erik described his experience of being drawn to university as a way of honoring the dedication of his parents to see him succeed. He expressed the sacrifice of his parents of moving “across town from a fairly average or below average school district to one of the top in the state” simply to better prepare him for future success in higher education. For him, it was never a question of wanting to go to college; rather, it became an “accepted worldview” of choosing to attend university as a way of thanking his parents for the sacrifices they made of ensuring that he had “every opportunity possible to succeed”. The purpose behind his choice of enrolling and graduating from a university is intrinsically connected to his relationship with his parents. For Erik, he experienced university through a sense of it being “something that was always going to happen” because he desired to reciprocate the hard work of his parents. While resisting the sense
of duty to meet a family expectation, he instead assumed a conscious mindset of purpose where he described, “I was destined to go to college to become the man I am today”.

Unlike Erik, Miranda enrolled in and graduated from university not to honor her parents, but rather, in response to a feeling that it was “simply the right thing to do, at the right time to do it”. She emphasized that her decision to enroll was based upon a sense of purpose that she maintained throughout her educational journey. This purpose was difficult to articulate, but remained a constant source of doing what she believed that she was “always meant to do”. She described the situation where she decided to enroll in post secondary education in relation to her daughter’s journey, which was nearing completion in high school:

P: It was January of her senior year, she was getting ready for finals and she was getting ready for graduation stuff at the same time. It just hit me that I needed to go back to school…so off I went.

Miranda insisted that she experienced a drive to return and graduate from college, even when others would “stare and gawk”. She would go on to describe this sense as, “I believe that there was just some reason I was to go back at this time and do what I was suppose to do”. She acknowledged that as a “woman in her fifties” enrolling in university was going to be challenging and graduating at age sixty-one is far from the normal experience. She would articulate her resolve, “I didn't care. That's what I wanted to do. That's what I felt like I needed to do and I went and did it.” This recognition further strengthens the idea that her mission was one based on providence and not the product of chance. Miranda describes a conversation that she had with her sister regarding her unique educational journey:

P: My sister said, “You kind of got a late start didn't you sis”? But I'm like, “Everything happens for a reason. And there is a reason that I have done this during this time of my life”. While most people during this age are not doing it, I go back to school. When my daughter is a senior in high school, I decide to go back to school.
Brianna also viewed her educational journey as one rooted in more than mere happenstance. She described her humble beginnings of being raised in poverty with a mother who “was a drug addict” and yet, she “wasn’t going to let that define” who she would become. Brianna would go on to describe, “I still see myself being more actively engaged” through unlocked opportunities due to her education. She feels beholden to the purpose of “furthering education and keeping that knowledge out there...being the advocate for education” to anyone willing to pursue its allure. Throughout the two interviews, Brianna continually harkened back to the idea of being driven by a purpose to explore education as a means of improving the status quo. She states, “I feel like I’m more” and describes a sense of responsibility to move beyond the circumstances into which she was born. Brianna elaborates:

P: Like, I'm like...I keep telling myself that I know I can do it and like I want to set that example for my family and for the kids you know. You can do this. So that keeps me driven.

Brianna described her experiences at the university as more than a mere desire to obtain a degree. She illuminated a greater sense of pursuing her destiny through enrollment and graduation, “going to college was bigger than simply going to college. I knew that it was meant to happen”.

Anita also acknowledges this sense of purpose and describes the difficult situation surrounding her decision to enroll at a university in a neighboring state. She describes:

P: It makes me feel great (to make the decision). Actually in the beginning people didn't think that I should leave the state for school because back in 2008 our businesses were going down so people were not willing to and not able to help me or send me to school in Indiana because of the big cut in their income. So, um, there is a lot of backlash from that but I went anyway, because that’s what I felt I had to do.

Anita describes that she was willing to pursue her educational goals in spite of familial pressure because she “felt” a purpose to follow what she believed she was destined to do. She depicts her
experiences in high school leading up to college as a “very strong Christian” who “jumped in faith” explaining, “I didn’t even have the money to come to school”. She would go on to describe her sense of purpose: “I kind of had to like, do it in faith and that's kind of what's been driving me to move ahead. The idea that God's going to take care of me so I'll just keep going.”

Carline echoes this sentiment, as she considered the purpose behind her decision to enroll in college as a means of feeling “complete”. She further describes this purpose:

P: I feel like I'm using the talents that God gave me. Some people can't work with kids. They can't stand it. God gave me the talent and the patience to work with kids who can't speak English...who are just a normal kid who has autism or ADHD. So, I've reached my goal and I am able to use those gifts.

Carline further described the challenges that she faced due to her decision to enroll in a university. She describes that in order to fulfill her purpose, of what she believes she is meant to do, she must first complete a college degree. She states:

P: So there was a lot of, like, fears and emotions that came into going to college and there were times during the program where I felt totally overwhelmed. Ya know, my job back home was like don't worry about college...just come on back here and be a manager. And I was like, Oh I'm just going to do it. I can't take this anymore. I'm just going to drop out of the program. I'm just going to say forget it. But at the end of the day I think...that I would never fulfill my goals and accomplish what I was meant to do. This is what kept me in it.

Carline describes her experiences of feeling “overwhelmed” and wanting to “drop out”, and yet, she felt that graduating from college would allow her to “accomplish what [she]…was meant to do”. She would further describe this sense of purpose in terms of how she will feel once she graduates:

P: I guess that it's going to be this sense of completeness. If that makes sense. Because I feel that I am never going to be complete until I become a teacher. I am not going to be who I am meant to be until I am a teacher. And so I feel like I am finally going to be complete when I have my teaching license and I have my degree and I'm out there searching for a job.
James recognized this completeness as he described, “I am exactly where I’m supposed to be, doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing”. He communicated his experiences as a community activist and university student organization president driven to promote social justice. James describes a recent experience where he organized a campus “die-in” and defended his actions in terms of fulfilling his purpose for being on campus:

P: And so I did this, as a student, embodying my fellow students so that they have a voice. They needed this...they wanted this...they are tired of living in this bubble and not participating while this damn world is going to shenanigans and we're just pretending...that education is what we're all about. And we believe in leadership and (the University) believes in developing leadership. Then damn it, ya'll need to go ahead and let the world know what is going on… So, I just need to do more for my students.

James articulates his purpose for being a first generation university student at this Midwest public university as he “sheds light on issues that the bubble doesn’t understand”. James describes how he is drawn by a greater purpose and that his being on campus in pursuit of a college degree is “what he is supposed to be doing”.

Martin also described a sense of purpose in choosing to go to college based on his “intuition”, acknowledging that his development was predicated upon his ability to fulfill a need to attend college. He described how he enrolled “for the spirit of learning and further developing who I am”. Martin experienced an intuitive purpose to attend university as he “literally just came here for...well everything here is what I want to learn. I just hope that it's enough”.

**Self-Reflection**

With the recognition that study participants have fulfilled or in the process of fulfilling a greater purpose in obtaining an undergraduate degree, study participants also described a notable sense of self-reflection throughout the process. These first generation university students experienced life within higher education from a position of introspection, where each individual carefully examined his or her existence in relation to the pursuit of a university degree. These
students carefully reflected upon life choices, as well as their attitudes, and the costs and benefits associated with their actions. Consistently, each participant described his or her experiences while enrolled in postsecondary education, as involving judicious consideration and self-reflection of the academic journey. Specifically, these experiences illuminated the internal plight of individual action, as well as the motivations behind those actions and the accompanying consequences. For example, Brianna described her experiences of initially “failing out” of the university during her first period of enrollment as “challenging”, but concludes, “Ultimately it was one of the best things that could have happened”. She acknowledges:

“I don’t think that I would be where I am today if I would have gone straight through the first time. I felt like because I took this path in life…I’m better because of it. Learning to take control of my experiences was so important to the journey”.

Miranda described a similar experience where she “flunked out of school the first time…enrolled”, and yet viewed the failure as an opportunity to grow. The experience was not one of dread or fear; rather, after considering her premature departure, Miranda viewed the failure in terms of correcting a mistake. She described how enrolling in college, the first time, was based solely upon how “everyone expected me to go and not because I decided to go on my own”. This experience resulted in her “unwillingness to put in the work” to become successful in the university. She described that by reflecting on that early experience, she was able to identify an authentic drive to succeed and eventually obtain a college degree. She states:

P: Students have to find or identify the drive. Like you. You have it in you. You have the drive for education and you had to make that decision. That decision comes after taking time to really consider the why’s and how’s and not just the doing. College education takes self-direction and it takes the realization that it comes at a cost.

Martin acknowledges the need to constantly reflect upon his positionality within the context of higher education throughout his journey. His reflection centers not on past failures, as with Brianna and Miranda, rather he reflects on the motivation that dives him to satisfy his
insatiable desire to learn. Martin described his sense of freedom to pursue learning, unlike many of his contemporaries, based upon his internal reflections of identifying what knowledge is of most value to him. He further embodied self-reflection as he described his sense of success:

P: Success can be anything. It could be coming and sitting down and saying that you had a good day. It could be sitting down saying that you didn't have a crap day. It could also be a good paycheck. It could be social, like you brought up a couple of times. Have I been successful in my own terms? Yea, If I wasn't then I wouldn’t be here. If I didn't feel successful I probably wouldn't be who I am. I kind of pride myself on who I am. I build my life on how I want things done and I have always succeeded with that. I feel successful.

Similarly, Carline described her sense of self-reflection in relation to being a first generation university student and her motivation for enrolling at an institution of higher education:

P: Being the first person in my family to go to college I made the decision that I am not going to live paycheck to paycheck. No, I am not going to struggle at times. I had to make that decision for myself, to get a career and have a job, a steady job. A job that I know is going to, ya know, put a roof over my head and dinner on my table in a warm house. And so I think that I made that decision to better myself, I guess to go to college I made that decision.

Likewise, Anita describes her ongoing internal reflections of considering her actions and beliefs in relation to the “strong family pressure” to meet the needs of the “family unit”. These dilemmas cause her to constantly evaluate her individual need with those of her immediate and extended family. For example, she describes:

P: I'm always taking care of random issues, like my task is financial problems (for the family business). So if there is something going on at home, business-wise, I'll be on the phone figuring it out. It would be better at home figuring those problems out and like attending a community college or junior college. And that was what everybody thought was the best option for me, but I felt like I wanted to be a scholar so I came here

She goes on:

P: Even now I feel like I should be home doing something like my parents’ affairs - that came out wrong, not affairs but business affairs - like they need to close a house and get a
new house. So they need to close on the old house and I feel like I should be there to help them. Because their English is not on point, but they know what needs to be done, but [my hometown] is filled with sketchy people so they need like a local there to make sure that they are not being ripped off or schemed or something like that because it happens all the time. To make sure that anything like that is not going on I would be more comfortable...they would be more comfortable if I'm there. So it is kind of hard being here and doing all of this when I know that I am needed at home.

And again, Anita considers the pressure of being a member of a large immigrant family and expressed her continued experience in reflecting upon those pressures. She described a situation where the need to think deeply, was essential, as she reflected about her desire to achieve in relation to the pressure of being a standard-bearer for the family:

P: Because we have family names and family honor...we are not in India anymore, but we still hold that. It's awesome. I love it. It's like being in a fraternity (laugh). We are the [surname]. That's our family name, so to have pride in that we have to like want people to say, “oh that's the [surname]. They raised this huge family of successful individuals”. And I don't want to be the one who isn't the one who is successful.

Like Anita, Erik experienced the pressure to succeed, not only for the sake of his parents, but also because of his desire to become “financially independent”. He described:

P: One of the main ideas that comes to mind, first and foremost, about autonomy is financial independence. Um, which I have not hit completely yet, but I am well on my way there. I've been told to appreciate my financial dependence as long as I can, but it's still an innate goal of mine to become financially independent, as soon as possible. I'm almost there...I'm thinking maybe even next year and that would be fantastic.

Erik explained that his goal of financial freedom has been established for many years, as has his plan for achieving this goal. He described that obtaining his degree was only a “step in the process” and that his plans are based on first “taking the time to really consider” what he wants out of life. Both as a first generation university student and as a first-year middle school social studies teacher, Erik expressed his need to develop “life-benchmarks”, which are products of his deep personal reflection. He described his belief that life can be successfully navigated through the careful consideration of “personal goals” while methodically pursuing those benchmarks.
As Erik described his goal of becoming financially independent, he communicated his experiences in developing a concept of independence beginning when he entered college, “I wanted to have a goal in mind, which when I came into college I wanted to; one teach and two teach social studies”. He goes on to express that he is working his plan and while he has not yet achieved all that he has planned, he believes, “I will get there...I'm ahead. I know that I am ahead of some of my associates in that manner. And that brings a level of confidence as well.”

James experienced self-reflection in his own unique way. He described the time when his family was visiting the university for Family Weekend where it was his responsibility to secure hotel rooms for everyone. He described the first time he left “the bubble” of the university in search for available rooms:

P: So I borrowed a friend’s car, drove down to [the nearest city] and booked them a hotel. And the story goes, at that moment of me leaving the bubble for the first time, it all changed, because I hadn't gone past Wal-Mart since that taxi put me in the bubble. And it was weird. I was trying to figure out...like I looked at everything and was like I haven't seen...it was like life. You know what I mean? It was like life is...the world is still going on. You know what I am saying? It was like dude you cant get stuck here. Like, here, this is your warning. You just woke up. Don't get stuck here...don't get comfortable here. Because you have seen what it does. The bus only takes you so far...you get comfortable on that bus and you're done. You know what I am saying? And it was it was...so it was a lot....that three months was enough of that. I popped my own bubble and I was like “NO”!

James described his need to routinely leave campus in order to maintain a clear perspective on his surroundings. After reflecting upon his situation in light of having his bubble burst, he articulated a very real need to visit his beast friend who was attending a regionally located university:

P: So I'll drive up there for a weekend just to clear a space so that when I come back in here it looks different. It's looks brighter. It's new...it's refreshed. It's not dingy. It's not...and there's no soft focus to what you are always seeing. You can pay attention again, because you haven't taken that footstep.
Internal Locus of Control

As study participants described their experiences concerning self-reflection, they coincidentally acknowledged the need to direct those experiences through the self-actualization of an internal locus of control. Self-reflection in conjunction with self-directed action is an aspect of autonomy and correspond to Dowrkin’s (1989) conception of autonomy, which includes the attitudes and actions of the individual. Consider Martin who repeatedly vocalized that enrolling in and pursuing a university program of study originated from within. Martin describes the motivation to enroll in university:

P: I want to go to college because I want to be the one who makes those decisions. I want to continue to further develop everything that I can possibly learn. And I knew there was a lot to be learned in college, but I also had a feeling that I wasn't going to learn everything that I wanted to and, therefore, I had to make the choice to pursue my own goals of knowledge.

Martin further described his internalization of control in terms of who benefited most through his decisions and actions to enroll in postsecondary education:

P: I am here for me. I am not here for my parents. I am not here for anybody else...friends...etc. But in the end, I am here for me. I don't like to say that much because it sounds so selfish. I should also be here for the students that I am going to be teaching. I should be here for whatever I am going to be doing for the rest of my life. But right now, I am just here for my own development.

Likewise, Miranda described her experience in recognizing that learning and graduating from university was the outcome of her decisions and actions. She states, “…you can always learn. Look, I just graduated from [a university], but that was my choice, my decision, and I own that. If I wasn't self-directed, I'd not be sitting here today”. She further communicated that she was the one responsible for the establishment of objectives:

P: I set high goals cause I made up my mind that I was graduating with honors and the one gal I talked to for Phi Theta Kappa at [at the university] I said to her “I'm going to graduate with honors”. And she said, “I am going to keep my eye on you”. It was a struggle but I did it. Like I said, homework is all I did. Cause I am the type that it has to
be done right. It has to suit me. And if it does not suit me, then I will tear it up and start all over. And I did a lot of times.

Anita recounts her experiences with exercising an internal locus of control in relation to a Student Government Association (SGA) election, where she purposefully stood in opposition to the implementation of a “Slate logo”. She states:

P: I did not like the logo. And I like to be an active member of everything that I do. So the design, I really did not like it. So when I saw the logo, I voiced my opinion that I didn't like it and it [voicing opposition] was not very popular from within the four slate members. It was not popular and we did not have the time or the budget to make changes. But I stood my ground when we had a whole staff meeting with our slate members and the design team. Ultimately, they made a new one and it was kind of like, well now we need to listen to [participant] more because she stood her ground that whole time and the entire design team agreed. And that carried a lot of weight. Now people listen to what I say more and it's not just, “oh that's just what one person thinks”. Now it's, “well that is what [participant] thinks”.

Anita went to on to describe how she didn’t particularly enjoy being in that situation, but acknowledged the importance of basing her actions upon what she felt was the best course available to achieve the desired outcome. Her actions where based upon an internal recognition that she is capable of choosing for herself, the direction of her experiences. She states:

P: I knew that if I wanted this to go the way that I felt was best, like if I wanted to have a good brand, then I knew that I had to be part of the process and make the decision to stand. In the end I was happy with the outcome, so now I have a logo that is great and I'm going to be happy with the brand we have.

Anita provided another example of her internal locus of control when she decided that an internship with the World Trade Center (WTC) would provide her with the connections and experience to “truly change the world”. While others, including faculty and her peers, communicated the implausibility of securing an internship with the WTC, Anita remained undeterred and decided to take action. She not only applied online, but also decided to pursue “the other route” of emailing and calling until someone was willing to talk with her about the
possibility of an internship. Eventually, she recounted, they “responded offered me a Skype interview and just hired me on the spot”.

Similarly, James described his experience as a freshman wanting to become an agent of change, when he first exercised his internal locus of control at the university when applying to become a Resident Advisor (RA). After engaging with his Hall Director and questioning why there were no African American male RAs, James internalized the discussion and realized that he had the ability to act in addressing this quandary. He describes:

P: Um and so that very day, I made the decision to make it my mission to become an RA. And now the rule is you can only become an RA in your sophomore year. And so I ran to a computer, looked up in Banner the class that he said you had to take, and for some God reason there was one spot left in the class. So that fall I took the RA class and I applied in January for the sophomore year. I got called on Jan 29, 2013…on my Birthday to have an interview for this semester.

James successfully secured the position of RA during the second half of his freshman year, when it fact, the rules concerning RA positions stipulate that only sophomore students and upperclassmen may assume that role. It was the realization that he possessed the capacity to act that led him to pursue the role of RA. Similarly, it was that same level of internalization that led to his departure. He described the events of his sophomore year where he was the only minority RA in a building “of over 400 freshman”, which presented him with more intended difficulties. James described that he had to eventually make the decision to quit, as he was “the one who decides what, where, when, how, why I live my life”. Speaking to his Hall Director he described:

P: I had a lot of conversations about how it's great that we have more ethnicity in the building and yet I'm still the only ethnic RA. You leave a lot of weight on me for me to have to go and talk with all of them. Because what you don't understand is that they don't always want to talk with just their RA. You know what I'm saying? It takes a freshman a while to get to the mindset that we learn in our junior and senior years. And so dealing with a freshman dorm you want to see someone that looks like them…who is going to be able to teach them: "this is what it is...this is the rules of the jungle...take it and go".
Since I was the only one, I would get into arguments and you know at one point I flat told her if I stay you will not let me be the only one. I said, “I will quit on you”. That's the truth. You need a male ethnic RA and a female ethnic RA, point blank period. There's no reason why every hall shouldn't have it that way.

Like James, Erik described his university experience in terms of developing the capacity to decide for himself the best course of action, based upon his desired outcomes. He described cultivating characteristics of autonomy through experiences of exercising his internal locus of control surrounding the need to secure insurance for a new car. Erik states:

P: A concept of autonomy for me is doing things that I had previously asked for or previously asked help to do...(that) now I don't ask for help. You know, I do it on my own. Um, like finding out more about auto insurance. I had to do that on my own because I got a new car. But car insurance was not at the front of my mind until I got the new car, and then I thought, “Oh Yea I have to do that and I know nothing about it”. And I had to get it within a day or two and I had to do a lot of research on my own, whereas previously I would have asked my dad, "What's this..." Then he would have told me and I would have then forgotten it because I didn't have to do it. Now I have to do things and if I don't it's not as though I'm going to get scolded or "Hey you better do this..." No, I really have to do them because nobody is going to be there to scold me about it. Somebody is going to pull me over or I am going to have to pay a fine or something like that. I'd rather avoid that. Doing things on my own…finding out things on my own. I’m the one who is responsible for the actions I take…or don’t take.

In response to a question asking about how he currently views his measure of control, as a recent university graduate, Erik described how he and his girlfriend view their ability to choose for themselves:

P: I think that it's really our world at this point and whatever choices we make…they go. Our parents now view us as responsible adults and we are not going to say, “hey we are thinking about getting a new place”. We are simply going to say, “hey we're getting a new place”. You know there's no more asking permission to do stuff...it's all us now and if we decide to do something, then we do it.

As Erik recognizes and further develops his ability to choose for himself, the best course of action to take in a given situation, he fosters autonomy and embodies an internal locus of control rooted in self-reflection.
Carline described her internal locus of control in relation to self-authoring the academic journey. She communicated the need to choose for herself certain aspects of the journey, which included the decision to pursue an immersive semester of hands-on student teaching. She explains:

P: Well, um with the Urban Program, the urban semester…I feel like I made that choice to do that program. I made the choice. So instead of taking courses here in a fifty-minute or a seventy-five minute lecture, you know Monday through Friday, where my schedule of eighteen credit hours dictates that I go home at night and do my assignments and be done with it. I made the decision that I'm also going to be in a classroom full time and I'm also going to have grading papers and grading assignments, giving homework plus taking those classes on the side and um doing the coursework. I felt like I had that decision and that wasn't dictated to me.

Carline described the realization that the decision was hers to make. Moreover, that decision came from within Carline after she reflected upon the additional workload of “grading papers and assignments” and determined that it was the best opportunity to fulfill her purpose of becoming an educator. Her decision to pursue “the more difficult route” extended itself into an action, whereby she enrolled and completed the requirements of the program. She further described her experience at a previous institution where the internal ownership over her educational journey articulated the emergence of autonomous behavior:

P: I'll do whatever it takes, as long as I graduate with a teaching license…that is all that matters. When things went sour at [previous institution] I took a stand myself and was like, “No you are not benefiting me. You are not giving me the best education available. You are not giving me what I am paying for”. I'm going to step up for myself and I came out of my shell and was like, “you are not dictating this for me anymore”. I'm going to step up and do what I need to do for myself.

Brianna experienced her internal locus of control in relation to possessing the liberty to make life choices such as enrolling in a university. She described the “freedom” to make these choices based upon her internal beliefs and values of self-determining her future. She explained that she will “not be defined by how others view me” or by the situations in which she finds
herself. Brianna further articulated that students, like her, must “understand that their situation does not have to define who they are. They are free to make their own choices”. She acknowledged that this was a skill, which needed to be developed, and that choosing for oneself is essential for becoming “free to be who I want to be. And if someone doesn’t like it…that’s fine too”. She described her experiences in making choices in a university as well as her motivation for making those decisions. It embodies her internal locus of control, as she describes:

P: I can choose. For instance, in college I decided my major. I decided what courses to take and when to take them…summer or whatever. I had to take responsibility for failing out the first time and I had to recognize that my choices matter. So, now I am on the advisory board about how to make things better for students. For me, I want it to be better not only for myself, but for others. I need to give back to change it…to make it better for my kids and for others.

Resisting Conformity

Many participants described their autonomous experiences within university as an opportunity to resist popular belief or majority opinion through the exercise of self-determination. These experiences forged the theme of resisting conformity with the implication of withstanding adversity and criticism based upon what the individual deemed most appropriate. Developing the wherewithal to reach a conclusion that stands in opposition to others and then respond in action illuminates the foundations of self-efficacy and autonomy.

James communicated these attributes through the manner in which he engaged the university community involving a controversial “student awareness rally” concerning a recent episode of police brutality. He faced opposition from many of his peers along with an undercurrent of disapproval resonating from the student body. Nevertheless, James acknowledged the inherent difficulties associated with the demonstration, as he believed his
actions to be essential for achieving student awareness and “popping the bubble” of denial. He states:

P: Point break period...I don't want to protest. That's the number one thing that people do not understand. I don't want to have to block your street. I don't want to have to walk four miles every day. But I have to. There is a difference between what I want to do and what I have to do. What I want to do is keep my ass at home and sleep. But you can't do that. What I want to do is have people who I am paying thousands of dollars to, to do their jobs, but I can't do that because we're so damn corrupt. What I want to do is watch the news and hear something good and not hear that another brother or sister of mine has been shot and nobody knows why. That's what I want. But I don't have that. We don't have that. So I have to wake up these people from thinking that the money they are spending on this education is enough.

His experience in this situation and others like it, have served to inform how James views his actions as being autonomous. James continually refers to himself as “owning an entrepreneurial spirit”, which means he decides for himself what and when he acts, regardless of those who would disagree with his actions.

Similarly, Brianna described several situations where she and classmates engaged in discussions concerning the manner in which parents of poverty demonstrate care for their children. She described one conversation with a student who was angry because “parents come though [the grocery store] line buying doughnuts with their food stamps”, which garnered a great deal of agreement from the class. To which Brianna responded, “they don't have that mindset [of living in poverty]. A lot of people don't have that understanding of one what it's like to live through it”. She went on to describe how the entire class attempted to sway her opinion that buying doughnuts with food stamps was wrong, but Brianna stood her position and would not relent. Brianna described another “heated” discussion where a student in her class began railing against the lack of involvement by parents of poverty in the lives of their children. She described how the class offered their silent agreement with the one vocal student and acknowledged the pressure she experienced as the lone opposing voice. She described:
P: A lot of people think that these parents don't care about their kids because they don't want to be involved. But that's not true. I think that's one of the biggest debates. I had a debate with a follow student and it got pretty heated where she didn't understand why there were parents who were willing to um, let their kids get a free ride through college when her parents have worked their entire life and she had to take out loans [to attend college]...and it got very heated.

Brianna described that she will always stand her ground, and resist mainstream or popular thinking if she experiences a conviction to do so. She communicated the need for other “at-risk” and first generation students to develop this attribute, especially in light of modern technologies. While she acknowledged the difficulty of exercising this level of individuality, of fostering a sense of comfort in being “true” to yourself, she articulated:

P: That's hard for a lot of people. You get so many high school and college students who are so concerned with what people think, and it's like ultimately 5 years from now…10 years from now, you won't remember or care about what the person next to you thought about you. It's amazing but so many students are like, “they like me on Facebook” or “they follow me on twitter” and that's what seems to matter most, but it’s so silly. What other people think, do, or say is not going to speed-bump your success. Whatever you choose to do…is your choice.

Anita’s experience with resisting conformity arose in terms of her struggle against complying with family pressure. She communicated that her family, both her immediate and extended family, insisted that she remain geographically close to their adopted home so as to remain informed and active in the family’s business interests. For Anita, this was a source of contention, as she longed to support her family, yet she felt compelled to pursue her own aspirations as well. She described that by being a member of a “first generation immigrant family”, her decisions concerned not only herself, but also her entire family.

Anita explained that this was especially true as it pertained to the decision to be the first person in the family to enroll in college. Because of that fact and due to the “financial pressures that resulted from the 2008 meltdown”, Anita knew that it was going to take the combined support of her family to realize her goal. This was a source of “discouragement” for her, as she
had to take a respectful stand, not against her family, but rather, for herself. Anita described, “I felt like I wanted to be a scholar so I came here”, as opposed to following the desires of her family and “attending a local junior college”. She acknowledged that by “knowing the history” of her family she “carries more weight” than other students. Anita knew that her decision to pursue a university degree, would change both the structure and status of her family as she explained:

P: We are recent immigrants here so I felt like and a lot of my family members felt like we were jumping to a whole new level of…I don't know, not class, but like a whole new level just by attending high school [and then] college. It was kind of, like, earth shaking.

Martin experienced a resistance to conformity in a public way, as he internalized and then vocalized a very real resistance to “taking the easy way out” of an assigned activity. He described his experience in an education practicum with “a whole bunch of other teachers in [a] class…doing something called micro-teaching”. The idea, as Martin explained, was to have each student prepare a thirty minute lesson “and then divide off in groups of five” to teach the lessons and receive feedback from the members of your group.

According to Martin, other than his frustration with his peers, as “everyone complained about the assignment” due to the amount of work, the course was moving along without difficulty. That is, until the instructor “came down with the flu and had to miss a couple of days”. In an email, the instructor asked that students continue with the micro lessons “gathered in your five groups like we have been normally doing for the past few days”. Martin described:

P: So, day three comes around and I already have a meeting and I'm going to be late. I email her (the instructor) and tell her that I'm going to be a little late. So, I show up about ten minutes late and I thought that I would be thirty minutes late, but I show up about ten minutes late and all of the kids are coming out of the class. So, I stop two of them and I say, “what's going on”. And they say, “Well (the instructor) is sick today so what we are going to do is just go over what we were going to talk about and our micro teachings and we are just going to go home”. And they did that in ten minutes, relatively speaking. And so I was like, “Oh, okay”. I had no idea that she had asked us to stay yet, so I haven't
found this email from her yet. So, then I go and I'm kind of happy. I mean who wouldn't be? Well, I find out when I opened the email and she says, “please continue what you were doing” and she used words like “trust” and she used words like “I depend on you guys and hope that you guys will continue”. And you know words like “trust” and “depend”...anyway. So, the next day she asks us to do it again, but it was my day to present and well, actually only about eight people showed up because they knew that it was going to happen again. So eight people showed up and only three of the presenters showed up that day and I had to get up in front of those students and say, “what in the world happened”. “What are you guys thinking?” I broke it down for them in that this is not professional. This is not who we are as teachers and practitioners and as professionals.

Martin described how he felt that it was “insane” that he had to “stand up and yell at them”, as it should have been a collection of contemporaries driven to perfect themselves as future educators. He told them that they had “really messed up” and that is was necessary to make amends. He even went so far as to insist that they collectively write the instructor an “apology letter” and that they “talk with her about what they should do” to make up the missed work. Martin described that the class, as a whole, “despised” him and “pretty much hated him” for being the sole voice of reason demanding that they “do the right thing as professionals”. He communicated, “I feel that it was just the kind of time for me to stand up and say, “You can’t do that”. He acknowledged that his actions were controversial, but expressed his contentment in being ostracized for speaking his mind, and thus, holding his position in the face of adversity.

Perseverance

The fifth theme to emerge from the exploration of autonomy in this study is one of perseverance. Participants, in their experiences as first generation university students, described stories of perseverance throughout the interview process. These experiences included overcoming financial uncertainty, histories of poverty, physical disabilities, and personal failings that forced some participants to dropout before reenrolling. Each described difficulty was viewed as an opportunity to foster and exercise the participant’s understanding of autonomy.
Consider Brianna, who described her experience of initially failing out of university and needing to enroll in community college to increase her grade point average before reapplying. She communicated, “I own that part of my life, but failing out of (the university) and then going to community college was really hard for me to have to take”. She described how she was “afraid to take that step down…even though you are going further in higher education”. Her experiences reveal a near tangible sense of perseverance in the face of adversity.

She further described her challenges as a university student in relation to her peers:

P: I think being at (this university) students come from a lot more affluent type of background. You have some who have come from similar backgrounds as me, um, but a lot of them didn't have that background of living in poverty and everything that goes into it… A lot of people don't have that understanding of what it's like to live through poverty.

Brianna continued to describe her experiences of growing up where it would have been, perhaps, easier to follow the example of her parents:

P: I had to break that perception that I had to fit in or follow a mold of what my parents did. I had to take responsibility and create a new life, a new reality for myself and my family. And it's like, when I met my husband we were in high school and like (our town) is a fairly small town and everyone knows everyone in the high schools. It's a smaller community. Some of his family thought that my family was white trash. I mean we were poor, we lived in a trailer, in a poor neighborhood, and I mean they had no idea who I was. They knew my situation, but they didn't know me. They just made an assumption on that...entirely not who I was. So, being able to show them that and not let what other people think define you. I am more than that. I can do more than that. I am free to be who I decide to be.

Anita and Carline both experienced financial hardship in pursuing a university degree. Anita describes that she “literally showed up at (the university) with twenty bucks in my pocket” and the determination to “figure it out once I got to school”. Carline described, “growing up in a single parent home, where my dad was not in the picture” with three siblings and a mother who worked two full time jobs as challenging. She explained, “just trying to handle the financial
situation” of going to university was a very real obstacle. She described this obstacle, but also communicated the drive to meet this challenge:

P: You know finding out where the money was going to come from. But I have always been a person who feels like, “well loans are just not a big deal”. It's your education and the money is worth it...the money is worth it. But it's the fact that they sent me a bill…can I get this paid before it's time to register for classes? So, that I'm not delayed from registering for classes and then all of my classes are filled up. And I think that's the hardest obstacle that I had to come through.

Carline explained that growing up and in the good times “living paycheck to paycheck” as her family did, leaves behind a legacy of “struggle and defeat”. She described a history of living with “hand-me-downs” from cousins and having to work her way through high school to help support the family. She acknowledged, “there were times where the financial aspect almost stopped me…just feeling like I can’t keep going”. Nevertheless, Carline endeavored to continue on her journey describing that there are “ways of finding the money”. She communicated, “Take out as many loans as you need. It’s worth it in the end…it’s an investment in yourself”. The lack of financial support contributed to Carline’s view of the low socioeconomic culture of survival, thus magnifying her drive to overcome obstacles in pursuit to be “the first one in my family to have a college degree”. Realizing that opportunity allowed her to follow “her dreams…not agreeing to be mediocre” as Carline aspired for everything that she “wanted to be and then some”.

James, like both Carline and Brianna, faced the challenge of funding his journey for a university degree. Being born and raised in a “rough New York” neighborhood, before relocating to the inner-city of Atlanta, he described the struggle with attempting to be “someone who is going to be able to do something...gonna be something”. His description of trying to become more than the situation he was born into was rooted in the need to pursue a college education. The problem, he described, was the lack of money:
P: The real obstacle or challenge that I faced was financial. That was the obstacle. I had the grades to go to school, so that wasn't a worry. I had the support of family to go to school. The only worry was, who is going to give me the money to make it possible.

James further described his experience with perseverance through the lens of a poor, black youth who also grew up without the use of a deformed right arm:

P: Having a broken arm you have no choice but to look at the world for what it truly is. I wasn't a child who grew up seeing the world as this beautiful thing and then getting the bubble popped and then saying, “Oh this is the real world”. No I was born into the real world. I had to live day in and day out in it. And so you come to learn what it is and to accept it. There's no more fear. You know it's just... I don't fear death.

His journey has not stopped with enrollment in the university; rather he has become inspired to lead others through adversity, further perpetuating the ability to overcome obstacles. As a young college activist, James described his continued experience with striving to provoke others into action in response to injustice. He expressed the plausibility that someone in his position “should be concerned” when dealing with such emotional and explosive situations surrounding topics that include “hate”, “racism”, and “inequality”. He described his feelings concerning his role as a university activist:

P: What am I supposed to fear in this world? What am I supposed to fear on this campus? I'm not calling you out on nothing that you don't know. The real problem is that you don't want to be called out on it. So, I am going to call you out, just like you had better call me out if I've done something. When you like to ignite the fire...you have to be twice as good on yourself and keep yourself in check. And so, I walk with my head raised.

Martin also experienced perseverance throughout his academic journey in terms of both his decision to enroll and the obstacles that he faced in furthering what he called “the spirit of learning”. He described that being the first person in his family to pursue a college degree brought about lukewarm reactions from his parents. This was a source of some distress for Martin, as choosing to pursue “learning for the sake of knowledge” was something that he had wished to share with his family. He stated, “they were pretty much ‘ok’ with whatever I wanted
to do”, which included his decision to go to college”. Martin communicated that his mother was the one who pushed him in “academics, all most too much’, but that support would not last. Martin explained that his mother “ended up having an aneurism…it’s kind of like a mini stroke…so she got paralyzed. She can't talk or do anything now”.

Like other participants, Martin also faced financial challenges and decided to first enroll in community college where he saved enough money to make his goal of a university degree possible. He described that through his enrollment in community college, for the first year he, “saved about seventeen thousand dollars getting those freshman classes out of the way”. While this made financial sense to Martin, he communicated that his time at community college was far from challenging and offered him very little reason to stay. His experience at that level forced him to develop an internal discipline to accept his current situation in light of the future benefits. He assumed the internal stance that “I determine, on my own, what I am going to do”, which included an agonizing year at community college. Martin believed that most of his contemporaries were there, not of their own volition, but rather through a system-wide manipulation of the constant barrage of “go to college or else”. Ultimately, his ability to overcome the internal desire to prematurely depart from community college contributed to his academic perseverance on the university level. He described:

P: We were always pushed in high school to go to college, to go to college. It drives me insane now that I am kind of an orbital thinker and how these kids are being yelled at constantly to go to college. And if you don't, you'll fail.

Martin explained that he “decided to make the choice to go from high school to college”, and that persisting through his year at the community college level reinforced his resolve to pursue learning at all costs. For him, overcoming difficult situations and learning to navigate the
complexities of higher education are part of the process of personal development. He acknowledges,

P: There are a lot of rocks and boundaries that you need to climb over in college to get through college. There have been many times where I have thought about leaving. I know that other people have too. You know, it just gets to the point where you are thinking, “man I could just be doing so many other things right now besides this”. But this is where I need to be.

Through Martin’s ability to persevere through these challenging transitional periods of higher education, he philosophically defined autonomy as, being “just who you view you are, in your practice, of being you”.

This sentiment was similar to that of Miranda who acknowledged that she, like Brianna, “flunked out of school” on her first attempt due to both social and personal pressures. She insisted that it wasn’t until she “identified the drive” to succeed, that she was able to persist and attain her goal of a university degree. She described a challenging experience of feeling like an outsider, isolated from the community of traditionally aged students due to her “advanced age”. She explained:

P: I was worried about fitting in with being so old...much older. There was one class that shut me out. It was one of my earlier classes and I would talk and they would just sit there. I'd say that, “I have all of this knowledge” and they would just shut me out. They just shut me off.

Such an experience can be daunting for many students, but Miranda made the choice to keep moving forward in search of her degree. She acknowledged, “I got disheartened about it. I got tired, ya know, especially when I did those 36 hour study trips”. But instead of choosing to quit or dropout, Miranda felt that her quest was essential and stated that it was “something that I felt like I needed to do”.

Uniqueness of Being First Generation

The final theme to emerge in this study relates to the unique attributes of being a first generation university student. Repeatedly, participants acknowledged the pressure experienced of being the first member of his or her immediate family to attend university. These experiences embodied such descriptions as “burdensome”, “added pressure to make it”, and “a weight that surrounds me”. Participants also described experiences of feeling underprepared to navigate the complex systems of higher education in relation to students whose parents attended college or university. These experiences, both the added pressures and the feeling of being underprepared to navigate the systems, were expressed as disadvantages to the overall college experience, and are unique to first generation students.

Carline, for example, lamented the disadvantage of being a first generation student, as she responded to a question about her experiences:

P: I feel a lot of added weight by being a first generation student. Ya know, with my mom… my dad is not in the picture. My mom having never gone to college doesn't know how to handle the financial situation of it. You know, she doesn't understand the loans and stuff like that...that's out there for kids. So, it's kind of expected that I take care of that for myself. She will help if I need her, but it's kind of up to me to go to the financial aid office to get the loan, to accept the loan, and uh, stuff like that. So, I feel that the financial weight wears, as opposed to someone...like I have a friend who their parents have gone to college. They know the ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ of how to move around and how to find out ways to get a cheaper loan. So, I don't know that. You know, I need a loan and I see a loan, I get approved, and I'm like, “I'm going to take it”. But it might have like a one hundred percent interest rate, but I'm just going to take it.

Brianna shares in this experience in that “being a first generation student and having to do everything on my own” was a distinct disadvantage. She described the feeling of isolation and the added responsibility of “having to find my own way through it. I had to be able to look at everything and figure it out and doing it on my own”. She would go on to communicate that by not having “parents who were alumni and having that connection” to the institution, she was
forced to learn the rules of attending postsecondary education as she experienced it. Brianna communicated that it was her responsibility for “having to learn” how to navigate the system on a daily basis, whereas “students with parents that had a college education just knew”.

Erik echoed this sentiment as he described the advantage of his peers, as they “knew what to expect during the first year” and in particular during the “first semester”. He communicated his experience, which involved the need to put in “more effort in my work” long after his contemporaries had started to apply themselves. This was particularly true during “that first semester” in which Erik had the “lowest grades…[of his] overall college experience”. While this is not necessarily unique to first generation university students, Erik acknowledged that lacking the understanding, advice, and first hand experience of parents who attended college would have been helpful.

Carline also shared her experiences as a first generation university student in terms of family expectations, which lacked an understanding of the rigors associated with higher education. The self-labeled “homebody” described how it feels to go home for the weekend, but still have academic responsibilities to meet:

P: Even though I am at home, it doesn't mean that I don't have to sit down and work. I mean, I don't get the luxury of “Oh, I'm home. I don't have to do homework”. No, sorry I can't go here or there. I can't go and do this running around because I have to sit down, because I have to study or I have this paper to write. They don't understand that. Sometimes they think that it's something that I can sit down and be done with in an hour and it's like “it's going to take like four hours”. So, I get the stress from the family not understanding. Stuff like that. I feel like if someone's parents went to college they would know the toll it can take on you. The effect of only getting two hours of sleep at night. But you have a paper and three tests.

As the first member of his family to attend college, James also experienced an added pressure to do well at the university: that he could not “let them down”. He internalized this pressure of striving to achieve his academic goals knowing full well that his entire family was
looking to him to prove that “anything is possible”. He described that he has an “older cousin who is currently in college. But she's been going back and forth for years”, which causes the family to both rise and fall with each period of enrollment and subsequent departure. James acknowledged a sense of connection between his cousin and his family, as he witnessed the shared elation of enrollment as well as the shared disappointment of failure. He described this pressure, “I feel as though there is a natural burden because your parents have this pride” in knowing that one of their sons will have a better life, a better future as a result of graduating college. For his close-knit family, “being the first with a college degree [will] open the door for everybody”.

James described the pressure of being a first generation university student, as he reflected upon the way his parents and brothers view his academic achievements. He communicated a feeling of being “surrounded” by the pressure to succeed not only for himself, but for his family also. He depicted the need of recognizing the added weight to his academic journey, but remaining true to his personal identity throughout the process as well. James described:

P: Oh, I have this son in college that's doing it the right way, as society says the right way is...you know, high school and then college...I got a son who is doing that. So there is this overwhelming pride that they have and so yea, you have that natural like "can't let them down". And your brothers, cause they are so much older than you...they always express how proud they are of you. How they wish that they could have done what you are doing. So, don't mess up cause you are doing it the right way. You are not doing it alone. You got your support. So naturally, you end up in all of that weight. Um, and I think knowing all of the weight is the reason that I did not go to school in state. Because I would see all of that weight all of the time. That weight would surround me. I'd be clouded in that weight of trying to be myself. And so I had to go off to a different state where I can be alone. Where they wouldn’t call on me everyday or I wouldn't see them. Where I can live my life.

James further described his feelings of being a first generation student as something that he considered to be an encumbrance that is ever connected to the plight of his family. He described how each sacrifice made by his parents served to improve the quality of his life as well
as the opportunities that became available. His decisions to pursue a university education
brought a great deal of pride to his family, but it also fostered in him a sense of needing to self-
author his own journey. He described it this way:

P: That's a great feeling for them and you can't take that away from them and I don't want
to. But at some point you got to figure it out for yourself. And for myself, it meant that I
had to go away and I do it for myself, you know what I am saying?

Anita also experienced a sense of “weight” associated with her academic pursuits in
relation to being a first generation university student. However, her experience was based
upon knowing the “history and culture of the family” and wishing to honor that history. She
explained, “Knowing my history carries more weight, because I know what my grandfather or
grandmother or parents went through, so that I am given the opportunity to gain this education”.
She explained the significance of the oral tradition of passing down family history from one
generation to the next, in order to instill a sense of “family pride” that serves to inform and guide
individual decisions. She acknowledged the struggles of her ancestors and described how they
influenced her decision to enroll in university:

P: Um, so what led me to go to college is the culture of my specific family. My
grandmother grew up in the 1930's. She was trained to be a secretary in South India. And
her father died and um she was young, so to keep up the family funds, because they were
running dry, she needed to marry because she was a woman and that would be good for
the family. So, she married my grandfather who was an estate manager and that was good
for her mother and her brothers. So, she was not able to finish her secretarial program and
my grandfather was in political science in India and he worked with Gandhi and with
creating our home state, which is called God's Country. And um, he was told that since he
doesn't have a degree that he wouldn't go far. So they both were lacking kind of what
they wanted without furthering their education, which is how that transferred down
through my mother's brothers and sisters and the pressure they put on us to do everything
that we want to do is rooted in the need for more education.

Anita expressed a sincere appreciation for the struggles of her family, both in India and in
the United States, as those difficulties allowed her to more actively pursue a university degree. It
was through a clear understanding that her parents and grandparents were limited in life due to a
lack of formal education, which inspired her to “go to college”. Anita also expressed the “unspoken responsibility” that she experienced to improve the family status, by taking advantage of every educational opportunity available. She believed that her level of responsibility would not have been as critical, had her parents graduated from college, as she became the beacon of hope for entire family. She described:

P: My family had a lot to do with it (going to college) because we had a lot of pressure on us to do and be more. We have pressure to do things successfully, but we really have more pressure on us to be proud, because we have family names and family honor.

The Phenomenological Structure of Autonomy

Giorgi (1985, 1997) emphasized that the final stage of phenomenological analysis involves a synthesis of the findings through a final articulation of the units of meaning and emerging themes resulting in a conceptual description. In this dissertation, the conceptual description of the phenomenon of autonomy, as experienced by first generation university students, is articulated through six themes: sense of purpose, self-reflection, internal locus of control, resistance to conformity, perseverance, and the uniqueness of being first generation. Each theme was brought to life through a descriptive dialogue of participants, which communicated the essence of autonomy as experienced (Vagle, 2014). This dialogue emerged as each theme communicated with one another in the formation of an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

For my participants, the lived experience of autonomy involves an abiding sense of purpose that is refined through personal self-reflection, which is then enacted upon through an internal locus of control. This internalization provokes the individual to resist conformity; thereby, allowing the person to persevere in standing his or her ground, through the refinement of overcoming the unique pressures of being a first generation university student.
The full experience of autonomy for my participants is described through an amalgamation of these six themes. It would not be possible for the experience of autonomy to exist for first generation university students without the presence of each individual theme. These six (6) themes emerged through multiple interviews of seven (7) first generation university students or recent graduates.

**Participant Response Throughout the Study**

Throughout the interview process and with each participant, I consistently paused the conversation to summarize the collected information and to seek clarification or corroboration of accuracy concerning the data (Creswell, 2007). Generally, this occurred as I would paraphrase what was communicated and then ask the participant if I understood it the way it was intended. For example, after Carline described her decision to pursue the *urban semester*, she went on to discuss that there were only “two options…but [she] picked the harder option”. She described that much of the program is outlined in advance with very little “leeway…but if you want to keep doing what you need to do in order to reach your goal, you just do it”. I then paraphrased her description and asked, “So even when you feel like it is mandated, you still feel as though it is your choice to put yourself under that mandate”. To which she replied, “right”. This action served to increase my confidence in the data, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as the truth-value. Once accuracy was established the interview would continue, as summaries were affirmed by participants and correctly reflected the intended experiences. Following each interview I would debrief with participants to ensure the completeness of the gathered data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and test my initial understanding of that data (Koelsch, 2013).
To further increase the credibility and truth-value of the findings, participants were contacted via email and presented with the opportunity to offer reactions to both the accuracy of the collected data as well as the preliminary results. The accuracy was established as participants reviewed portions of the transcripts and given the opportunity to affirm the collected data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Consistency was established through the use of critical friends (Stake, 2010) who supported my articulated themes. Participants also supported the preliminary findings of the study, affirming the articulation of themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was important that I received not only confirmation of the findings, but I also wanted to ensure that I authentically captured the feelings and experiences of each participant. By utilizing member checks, as ascribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) I engaged participants in asking them to review the findings and consider my interpretations in relation to the identified themes and the conceptual description. Like Bloor (1997), I was worried about the time and attention participants would give to the member checking process. To help with this concern, I engaged participants often and informally as a means of ensuring corroboration (Creswell, 2007).

Koelsch (2013) advocates using a structured member check interview as part of the research and informed consent process. That may have been helpful in providing a foreseeable platform of dialogue and collaboration with participants, after the collection of data, to discuss the credibility of the findings. As university students tend to become quite busy during the final months of the spring semester, arranging face-to-face meetings was difficult. Instead, I worked to engage my participants through email and phone conversations. Initially, only five (5) participants offered comments concerning the findings; however, after additional efforts were made the remaining two participants were contacted and feedback was provided.
Understanding the demands of being a first generation university student in the later stages of the spring semester and asking participants to confirm my findings felt a bit intrusive. I worked to placate this sense of intrusion, by thanking each participant for their time and engaging them in a casual dialogue, as opposed to immediately reviewing the findings. In the end, I personally met with four participants (4) and received email confirmation from the remaining three (3) regarding study results. Universally, the conceptual description as presented in this chapter was given express approval by study participants.

Erik, who you may recall is a first year teacher, and offered his agreement of the analysis and the identified themes, but offered little in the way of elaboration. James expressed an appreciation for the articulated themes and elaborated on self-reflection, “I like that one. People think I just act, but that’s not the case. I always think first. [I] always spend time deciding my own options”. Martin also felt strongly about this specific theme as representing a “portion” of his experience. He once again embodied self-reflection as he stated, “I had to spend some time considering that one before I realized that’s just what I do”. He indicated that “pondering” would also be a possible substitution, but acknowledged “self–reflection” is a god fit as a “call for action”.

Both Anita and Brianna indicated that the articulated themes are attributes that they experienced during their time at the university. While Anita experienced them as a campus leader stating that she has her “own way of ding things” and that she is her own “harshest critic”, Brianna experienced them as a “commuter student” who decided for herself “what action to taken when it was needed”. Brianna also expressed, “I think that the themes are a great representation of my experience in college. I personally believe that 4-6 are especially meaningful to me”. Having previously consented to the accuracy of the gathered data, they also
both agreed with the analysis of that data and the articulated conceptual description. Each described how the findings seemed to represent the struggles as well as the victories experienced as undergraduate students.

Carline was perhaps the most enthusiastic stating; “This is how I see myself in college”. She expressed a sense of vindication for “feeling helpless at times” but “driven to reach my goals and dreams” of a university degree. She discussed the appropriateness of resisting conformity because she “knew that making it to the end” meant that she, as a first generation student, was a responsibility that she put upon herself. She described how going to a smaller private college and “nearly failing out” was because she “always did what her friends did”.

In the following chapter, I will interpret the findings of this dissertation beginning with a brief overview of the study, the significance of the findings, phenomenological structure of the findings, the implications of the study, and the implications for education and research.
Chapter Five: Summary and Discussion

This phenomenological study was conceptualized and developed in recognition of the incessant and costly rate of postsecondary student attrition in the United States. The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experiences of first generation university student autonomy, and to view that experience in relation to academic persistence. Bounded within this study, autonomy embodies Dworkin’s (1988) definition as both the capacity to act, as well as the attitudes and motivations that serve to inform the action. This study examines the unique autonomous stories of seven first generation university students, or recent graduates, who have successfully engaged in the pursuit of a postsecondary degree. Participants represent diverse segments of the overall student population from a Midwest public university while drawing from a broad range of academic majors; yet, they share significant overlapping experiences throughout the academic journey.

Study Summary

The genesis of this study was to wrestle with the socially constructed concept of autonomy in relation to postsecondary student persistence within the United States. Through its conceptual evolution the study developed to specifically gain a better understanding of how first generation university students experience autonomy and to consider the implications of autonomy on their academic persistence. Autonomy, itself, is a contextualized phenomenon, yet conjures characteristics that appear to be highly coveted across many sectors of society, including the field of education.

Contextualized within the field of education, scholars such as Bruner (1996), Eisner (1985), and Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) advance education as an autonomy-producing endeavor that provides an opportunity for students to develop creativity, authenticity, and
originality. These attributes have been acknowledged to significantly contribute to both individual fulfillment (Rawls, 1999) and academic success (Holec, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 1987; Schwartz, 1977). As philosophers like Plato (trans 1935), Kant (1784/1999, 1785/1990, 1797/1965), and Raz (1986) have concluded, only the autonomous person can reach his or her full potential, it serves to reason that endeavoring to understand autonomy in relation to academic persistence is a worthwhile goal.

The motivation to study first generation university students was influenced by Ward et al. (2012) who described this population as a unique student subgroup that possesses the capability to direct the national discourse on higher education initiatives. This influence is accomplished as a greater number of first generation university students are consuming a larger percentage of available resources through their enrollment in postsecondary education, yet maintain significantly lower rates of student retention and academic persistence (McGlynn, 2011; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The costs associated with student attrition are staggering, which include a large percentage of first generation students. First, recall the manner in which student attrition negatively affects the nation through the loss tax revenue (Bedsworth et al., 2006), increased expenditures for social services (Barbatis, 2010; Baum et al., 2013), and the ability to maintain an economic global competitiveness (Engle & Tinto, 2008; OECD, 2014b). The institution suffers through such negative effects as lost revenue and the cost of student recruitment (Risman, 2013) as well as the loss of prestige and academic standing (Schneider, 2012). Finally, the individual student assumes the negative consequences of acknowledging his or her lost potential (Barefoot, 2008, Ward et al., 2012), a lack of financial stability (Baum et al., 2013), and the repayment of unjustified debt (McGlynn, 2010).
The overarching research question that guided this study asks: How is autonomy perceived and experienced by first-generation university undergraduate students, or recent graduates, and do those experiences influence academic persistence? Three sub-questions were posed to further inform the study.

1. How do first generation university students experience autonomy regarding the decision to attend an institution of higher learning?
2. How do first generation university students define the nature and conditions of autonomy development?
3. How do first generation university students experience autonomy in relation to academic persistence?

As a means of addressing these questions, a qualitative descriptive phenomenological (Girogi, 2009; Vagle, 2014) approach was designed where seven first generation university students participated in multiple in-depth interviews. These participants, all first generation students, were purposefully selected based upon what I perceived as having first-hand experience with autonomy in his or her successful pursuit of a university degree (Moustakas, 1994). From my connection and experience with each participant, it appeared that these seven individuals possessed the life experiences that would allow me to better understand autonomy in relation to academic persistence and degree attainment.

Initial interviews were conducted with each participant, which were recorded and then transcribed. These initial interviews followed a semi-structured format, with questions that were connected to the three research sub-questions listed above. A careful and prolonged examination and analysis of each transcribed interview took place, which included a continuous comparison to the recorded interview for accuracy. Upon completion, additional questions were identified.
and asked during each follow-up interview. Upon the conclusion of follow-up interviews, each exchange was transcribed and the analysis phase continued until all identified units of meaning were established. These units of meaning, which are extracted quotes from the interview process, were further analyzed resulting in the emergence of multiple themes (Vagle, 2014).

Through the data gathering and analysis phase, a rich description of the lived experiences of my seven participants, concerning their pursuit of a university degree, came into being. The shared experiences have illuminated the complexity associated with identifying a singular concept of autonomy, instead paying homage to Dworkin’s (1988) stated contention of the existence of “many conceptions” (p. 9). The findings reveal the intimacy in which participants engage in the awareness and fostering of autonomy through their description, which are based upon the emergence of six themes.

**Interpretation**

This study extends our understanding of autonomy as experienced by first generation university students and provides a wealth of knowledge concerning the influence it has on academic persistence. The data describe the manner in which first generation students developed and fostered autonomy, thus illuminating the significance of such characteristics as intrinsic motivation, self-authorship, and perseverance. The findings indicate that participants experienced autonomy in unique ways, yet there existed an overlay of experiences resulting in the emergence of six themes. Through an interpretation of the findings, study participants believed that autonomy is not something that simply appeared; rather it was developed through life experiences both prior to and during university attendance. The following sections interpret the findings from the study and are intended for use by retention and persistence student affairs
professionals, as well as interested faculty of higher education who are committed to supporting the individual in reaching his or her fullest potential.

**Theme 1: Autonomy through a sense of purpose.** The significance of this theme is found in the internal feeling or intuition expressed by participants in relation to his or her individual academic journey. The sense of purpose is an experience that does not appear to originate beyond the individual; rather, the sense of purpose is experienced from within the individual. Developing autonomy through a sense of purpose speaks to the process of acknowledging an abiding motivation that serves to fuel the pursuit of a university degree. I contend that this theme is rooted in an intrinsic motivation to both pursue and persist upon a given course of action. As we can see from the descriptions of study participants, clearly the concept of doing “what feels right” or what is “meant to be” is not contingent upon external factors. As evidenced by participants who have faced both failure and challenge during his or her academic journey, they nevertheless continue toward the goal of attaining a university degree. This sense of purpose seems to embody the concept offered by Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) as an internal motivation where the individual sets for him or herself a course of action predicated upon an internal directive. This sense of purpose is a driving force that appears to have focused the drive of each study participant to achieve the goal of a university degree.

Recall that Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) articulate the capacity of the individual to exercise self-efficacy, through an internal prompting, which is the primary determinant of individual persistence of a set goal. For my participants the instinct to pursue a course of action, for instance pursuing a university degree that involves the sacrifice of time and resource, is a substantial finding. This realization seems to place the individual on an internally motivated path of self-direction, which according to Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) will yield greater success
and persistence. While it is within the realm of possibility to envision an individual enrolling into college on a whim, it is difficult to imagine that same individual persisting to graduation without intrinsic motivation and the fulfilling an internal sense of purpose.

As each participant engaged in the academic journey, it appears as though he or she experienced a greater sense of fulfillment due to the fact that the individual was affirming the decision to pursue a university degree. This affirmation further contributed to academic persistence, and consequently again lies in agreement with Pintrich and DeGroot’s (1990) supposition that following an internal motivation leads to academic success. For example, when Miranda described her decision to pursue a university degree she stated, “I believe that there was just some reason I was to go back”. I interpret this to mean that there existed an unspoken internal desire to reenroll in higher education, even after she had initially “flunked out”. Since there existed a sense of purpose behind the decision to enroll, Miranda experienced a greater sense of fulfillment (Rawls, 1999) as she awakened to satisfy that purpose through an intrinsic motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

This study revealed that autonomy was experienced through a sense of purpose, and for my participants, that purpose equates itself to the intrinsic motivation to reach one’s perceived potential. Contextualized within higher education, the findings support the notion that a student population that enrolls due to a sense of intrinsic purpose has the potential to successfully persist to graduation, thus alleviating a portion of the costs associated with student attrition. The internal motivation to engage in “what was meant to be”, as described by study participants, is tantamount to Mill’s (1859/1956) statement, “A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature” (p. 73). In this, I contend that the intuitive emotion of pursuing what was “meant to be” was in fact an extension of the individual’s desire emanating
from his or her nature. This sentiment is echoed throughout the literature of autonomy in terms of determining for oneself the best course of action (Dodson, 1997; Kant, 1784/1999; Kekes, 2011, Rawls, 1999). Taylor (2005) clearly indicated that self-authorship is a vital component of autonomy, which is reinforced by Raz (1986) who insisted that self-authoring one’s life is essential to reaching his or her fullest potential. Therefore, as my participants recognized that they have a sense of purpose, they in essence acknowledge the intrinsic motivation to self-author that purpose, which in this case was to persist toward the goal of a university degree.

**Theme 2: Autonomy through self-reflection.** Developing autonomy through self-reflection is a significant finding of this study, as this process of contemplation seems to align itself with longstanding aspects of autonomy. The interpretation of this theme involves the manner in which participants internalized their experiences and through that internalization, they demonstrated a resistance to reacting in a visceral manner, instead opting to weigh all options.

From an educational standpoint, recall that it was Dworkin (1988) who indicated the need for students to reach conclusions through reflection and Holec (1981), in agreement, suggested that self-reflection allowed the learner to assume a greater level of responsibility for learning. Through the self-reflective process, participants appeared to intimately analyze a response to a given situation. Recall Brianna, who after engaging in self-reflection over the decision to reenroll in postsecondary education, stated that “Learning to take control of my experiences was so important” to her journey. The introspection was an opportunity to learn from the situation, and then respond accordingly.

By reflecting upon academic activities and assessment, the learner becomes more adept at directing his or her level of engagement (Morse, 1997). The self-reflection found within this study speaks of a process whereby each participant engaged in Kant’s (1784/1999) freedom to
live one’s life as he or she determines, yet the participant also assumed Feinberg’s (1973) conception of autonomy requiring the individual to first reflect upon his or her “ideals, goals, values and preferences” (p. 32). It would be after this reflection that one would possess the capability to freely act according to his or her will. Otherwise, Kant (as cited in Cahn, 2009) submits that the individual would remain in that animalistic state, thereby reacting in accordance to the first-level base desires and impulses of humanity as opposed to the higher-order needs of reason. This process of self-reflection for study participants became the preverbal hitting the pause button, so that he or she could consider the situation in its entirety.

This establishes a process wherein the action of the individual was predicated upon an internal evaluation to what Frankfurt (1988) describes, as the first order desires to act. Fostering autonomy through the individual’s capacity to question oneself is in fact identifying with the individual’s internal desires and then determining whether or not those desires should be put into action (Dworkin, 1988). As revealed in the study, this self-reflection as part of the academic journey appeared to serve in fostering a sense of freedom to reach decisions based upon the participant’s idiosyncratic preferences. This self-reflection was portrayed throughout the interview process as participants thoughtfully considered the motivations of their actions as well as the potential consequences. Recall that Carline and Miranda carefully reflected upon past failures and eventually viewed them as events that positively influenced their academic identity, and thus their persistence.

Each participant, in his or her own way, articulated the concept of introspection as an aspect of choosing the best course to pursue. As I understand it, self-examination involves an evaluation of one’s attitudes and motivations to act. Dworkin (1988) clearly indicates that autonomy is more than the freedom to act, as that action is predicated upon the attitudes and
motivations of the individual to act. He claimed that, “the choices people make and the
significance and value of their making those choices in accordance with their own standards and
preferences” (p. ix), is an essential process in developing autonomy. It stands to reason that
these seven participants view self-reflection as a vital aspect of the academic journey and
important to the individual desire to achieve his or her full potential.

During the academic journey of these seven participants, the experiences described have
given the impression that developing autonomy involves a process of self-reflection. Each of my
participants indicated that their choices were reached as a result of careful consideration, based
upon their internal desires, beliefs, and attitudes. Recall that for Martin, his reflections centered
on his intrinsic motivation to better himself through learning. In this we see the internalization
of those desires, beliefs, and attitudes, which coincides with Feinberg (1973). Again, we are
drawn back to Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) in that autonomy is a function of the individual
determining a course of action based upon the internal motivation to act. Further, it was Scanlon
(1972) who connected the autonomous decision making process to the individually held beliefs
and ideals of the actor. The assumption here is that my participants experienced autonomy
through self-reflection.

Theme 3: Autonomy through an internal locus of control. Participants in this study
described many examples of taking action based upon the realization that the authority to act was
based within them. These descriptions depicted the manner in which individuals exercised this
authority through such actions as enrolling in the university, assuming leadership roles within the
educational community, and making life choices. The internal locus of control appears to have
become the vehicle through which participants developed and exercised their conception of
autonomy. The recognition that the authority to act resides within the individual provided them
with the capacity to move beyond mere introspection and onto action. In the findings we see that the internal locus of control became the lever through which participants exercised their desire to act. Within the educational paradigm, I am persuaded to believe that this action is what allows the individual to transition from a passive learner into an active participant (Holec, 1981). Through active participation, the learner also assumes responsibility for the learning endeavor, thus contributing to individual accountability that further drives the quest for knowledge (Schwartz, 1977).

Viewing autonomy through an internal locus of control is a significant aspect of the findings, as many autonomy scholars incorporate both the freedom to act (Goldstein, 1978; Kant, 1784/1996), as well as the action itself in conceptualizing autonomy (McAvoy, 2013; Raz, 1986). This speaks to the importance of being able to act as one determines for oneself. Experiencing autonomy through the recognition of an internal locus of control is linked to the scholarship of Eccles and Wigfield, (2002), Zimmerman (2000), and Zimmerman and Bandura (1994). In this line of the literature, we see the manner in which the individual decides to exercise the intrinsic motivation to act. For example, as my participants choose to enroll into the university for themselves, the responsibility to remain true to that choice is their responsibility. Participants communicated that acknowledging that the control was within their authority, moved them to feel more confident in their actions. Moreover, this level of accountability may have become the catalyst for both Miranda and Brianna to reenroll having initially failed out. It was Wilkins (1917) who emphasized that individuals must first become aware they possess the capacity to act, prior to acting. In this study, we see that participants first came to an understanding that they could in fact act according to their will, and once that apprehension occurred, they engaged with a high degree of accountability.
From the perspective offered by Wilkins (1917) and in conjunction with Zimmerman and Bandura (1994), it would seem that participants not only recognized the capacity to act, but also held themselves accountable for the action. Consider the story of Martin, who stated, “I wanted to go to college because I want to be the one who makes those decisions”. In this, he acknowledged that the decision to go to college was his to make, and then connects that decision to holding himself accountable for “pursue[ing]” his goals for knowledge. I take this to mean that as he drives the motivation to pursue a college degree, he does so with the implicit expectation that he will achieve his goal of gaining a greater depth of knowledge. The expectation of not only setting one’s course through life, but also reaching the desired destination is significant. Study participants, while perhaps wavering at times of duress, demonstrated a high degree of confidence in their ability to succeed. That connection is really quite extraordinary, as Eccles and Wigfield, (2002) contend that the level of confidence in one’s ability to conduct oneself is a building block of self-efficacy. If an individual believes that he or she will be successful upon a task, according to Bandura (1997), that individual is more likely to succeed through self-efficacy. It is in this vein where we cross over into autonomy, as experienced by participants, because the level of self-efficacy determines the level of effort one applies toward reaching his or her goal. The determination of effort correlates to the self-reflection discussed previously as well as the individual’s willingness to preserve and therefore, apply greater effort.

Consider Erik’s recognition of his internal locus of control in relation to acquiring auto insurance. He found himself in a situation where he needed to secure insurance and realized that he no longer needed to “ask for help”. It would appear that Erik assumed Young’s (1986) sentiment that the ability to “shape and direct” (p. 109) his life originated from within himself.
He made a conscious decision to meet a need based upon the realization that, “I’m the one who is responsible for the actions I take…or don’t take”. Raz (1986) supports this line of thinking as he indicated that the ability to engage in action embodies autonomy. I believe that we are witnessing a connection to this understanding, which extends the work Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), as well as Ryan and Deci (2000), in the supposition that fostering autonomy empowers the individual to self-direct and self-regulate. In this we see the transitional aspect of autonomy from a concept that is internalized to the outward manifestation through action. This aspect is quite meaningful, as we now move beyond a discussion of mere action for the sake of action and instead embrace it through a purposeful, contemplative design.

**Theme 4: Autonomy through the resistance to conformity.** It was very important to study participants that we discuss, in detail, the opportunities where each exercised his or her individuality. I interpreted this to be an area of great significance, as participants seemed to be drawing their confidence from those experiences. The ability to resist conforming to the ideas or opinions of others is well established within the body of literature involving autonomy. Consider Heidegger (as cited in Hinchman, 1996) who advanced the idea that the autonomous person is the one who is able to hear and respond to the inner self or conscience, thus allowing the individual to be authentic and unmoved by the will of the majority. The experiences of each participant involving situations of standing firm for his or her conviction (Fienberg, 1973) appears to have emboldened the individual. From an educational perspective, especially within the halls of higher education, self-sufficiency is the resounding mantra, as we aspire to provoke the strengths of the individual to withstand scrutiny. Aristotle (as cited in Pérez & Ziemke, 2007) positions this concept as central to identifying and securing individual happiness and fulfillment, which is not dependent upon caving to the will of others.
In light of the findings, I contend that experiencing autonomy through one’s ability to resist conforming to the pressures or coercion of others is indistinguishable from autonomy scholars who attribute this very aspect to reaching one’s full potential (Rawls, 1999, Raz, 1986). As my participants described examples of resisting the coercion of others, it confirmed Wolf’s (1970) conception of autonomy that views sovereignty of the individual as something achieved when the individual is no longer subject to the will of another. This is quite significant, as my participants experienced the ability to stand their ground in the face of overwhelming criticism, which directly relates to an aspect of autonomy. Further, from an educational perspective Pinar (2012) advances the idea that learning in the postmodern era embodies individuality and authenticity.

It is this ability to not only voice a dissenting opinion, but also to exercise one’s convictions in the face of adversity that contributes to living autonomously (Scanlon, 1972). Think back to the compelling description offered by Martin, as he stood his ground in opposition to the majority of his class when they collectively decided to abandon the requisites of the course while the instructor was absent due to an illness. He agonized over his decision to confront the group, yet in the end was induced to “do the right thing” based upon his internal reckoning. This ability to resist the influence of others is historically connected to multiple conceptions of autonomy, and often referred to as directing one’s course through life in the face of coercion (Kant, 1784/1996, Kekes, 2011). This is an extraordinary section of the findings, as we can view the experiences of these participants in the light of the literature concerning autonomy, and can appreciate the confidence gained through the experience. Next, let’s revisit the plight of James who when faced with the disapproval of his peers and university administrators, continued to follow his convictions of “popping the bubble” of denial in relation to a staged “die-in”. Again,
the theme of resisting the urge to conform to the will of others looks to be an experience or an extension of our understanding of autonomy and a source of self-assurance from which study participants have drawn.

Whether considering the works of Feinberg (1973) or Wolf (1970) developing the ability to withstand the will or influence of another is a crucial aspect of autonomy, and this appears to be occurring throughout the experiences of my participants. The connection to choosing, for oneself, a course through life and then standing firm in that choice is a significant aspect of these findings and serves to affirm the literature regarding autonomy. Kant (as cited in Cahn, 2009) articulates the necessity of resisting others when reaching life choices, as a fundamental component of attaining one’s full autonomous potential. The aspect of resisting the influence or conformity of others is also connected to the Ryff (1989a, 1989b) Scales of Psychological Well-Being, and is a highly recognized component of autonomy. The emergence of this theme communicates to me that my seven participants, whether cognizant or not, engaged in a mature form of personal autonomy, as they stood in opposition to unrelenting pressure. These experiences move beyond simply taking a stand for an opinion of personal preference, as they instead reach deeply into our understanding of what it means to be a free thinking autonomous being.

**Theme 5: Autonomy through perseverance.** Descriptions of how study participants faced and overcame adversity throughout the university experience filled each interview. The importance of sharing these humbling experiences was not lost on me, as participants were willing to open themselves and to reveal the details of their struggles so that others may benefit. Time and time again, participants indicated that far too many students simply give up when things become difficult. I believe the intention behind sharing these experiences was to
demonstrate that even the most challenging of situations could produce positive results. Whether growing up in a single parent home with three siblings existing “paycheck to paycheck” or deciding to attend the university “as a women in her late fifties”, these participants took pride in the fact that they had learned to continue on the journey of striving for something better. Recall James who indicated that he was “born into the real world” with an unavoidable physical impairment and admitted that it would have been easy to simply give up. Instead, he acknowledged that the odds were, in fact, stacked against him, but that he experienced freedom from that realization and concluded, “there’s no more fear”. These rich descriptions, as offered by participants, surely speak to life’s struggle, but I believe that they do more than that. These challenges communicate the manner in which the individual was provoked to develop a higher form of reasoning. It is as though these experiences developed within the individual a capacity to view situations more thoroughly, to critically evaluate the obstacle and respond according to a balance between need and desire.

It would be difficult to consider the concept of autonomy in the absence of adversity. Based in the literature, we know that autonomy involves aspects of standing in opposition to the will of another (Wolf, 1970), but according to Kant (as cited in Cahn, 2009) it also means overcoming the animalistic propensity to be ruled by internal desire. This speaks to perseverance, as well as the exercise of self-rule (Fienberg, 1973) in abrasive situations. Imagine if James had decided to resign himself to a life of half measures listening to his internal lure to blame his impairment for his situation, and quit the university when things became difficult. Instead, he continued on his mission of opening others to new experiences, as he continues to follow his dream in the face of adversity.
Kant (1784/1996) describes the birthing pains of developing the ability to direct one’s life through the rigors of the educational journey as a means for awakening “ripe individual thinking” (Buchner, 1904, p. 24). Therefore, as participants described their individual stories of struggle and strife that culminated in the victorious accomplishment of a university degree, it seemed as though perseverance began to speak to the foundations of autonomy. The very idea of withstanding disappointment and even personal failure only to once again rise and meet the next challenge embodies the directing of one’s autonomous self-will to persevere (Raz, 1986).

Rawls (1999) speaks to the autonomous conception of the individual pursuing his or her interpretation of the good as a means of promoting human rights. This again brings to mind the experiences of James who passionately stood for the social justice of those who had no voice. It would seem that his experiences embody that concept, as he along with those he seeks to support have faced constant ridicule and pressure to lay down the fight and accept the status quo. It would appear that this speaks to the very nature of what Rawls intended, and is a significant aspect of the findings. The ability to experience autonomy through perseverance is a meaningful contribution of this study. While it may be easy to talk about overcoming adversity in the comfort of anonymity, through the rich descriptions offered by study participants, we can begin to experience the true depth of individuality needed to persevere through what James rightly refers to as the ugliness of life.

The collected stories of academic persistence of my participants were portrayed in very unique ways for each individual, yet universally perseverance was acknowledged as central to the lived experience of being a first generation university student. The idea of facing obstacles and then overcoming the odds to become the first person in the family to graduate from a university was significantly important to each participant. Recall the manner in which Brianna
described that she “owned” her initial postsecondary failure and expressed a fear to “take that step down” by enrolling in a community college. She could have remained in that position of fear, but instead endeavored to regroup and continue on her journey. The meanings ascribed to each individual’s ability to overcome such obstacles seem to speak to the importance of this aspect of autonomy.

Kant (1797/1965, 1785/1990) advances the idea that autonomy is connected to the individual’s ability to suffer and ultimately overcome the difficulties and hardships of life. He expands on this concept in Cahn (2009, p. 254):

It is also of no help to those who in their youth have been spared by all too much motherly affection, for later on they will be opposed all the more from all sides, and receive blows everywhere, as soon as they get involved in the business of the world

In this section, Kant is advocating that the individual must endure opportunities to persevere as a means of fulfilling his or her potential, vis-à-vis, autonomy. It is his contention that if a child were to develop in an environment without struggle, due to the overindulgence of motherly or fatherly nurturing, as an adult the individual would be unable to withstand the rigors of life. That sentiment was rooted in the experiences of my participants, as they repeatedly shared stories of not only overcoming barriers in their academic journey, but also learning how to better anticipate and navigate the barriers yet to be seen. In a time where obtaining a postsecondary degree has become a perceived necessity for survival, it only seems appropriate that we recognize the student’s capacity to persevere in his or her academic journey, and foster the increasingly needed conception of autonomy.

Finally, participants benefited richly from the struggles that saturated their academic journey, which is also inherent with persevering within difficult situations. Such struggles as securing funding or overcoming past failures appeared to have not only contributed to an
increase of individual confidence, but I also interpreted them to have produced a sense of calmness. Their perseverance added to the psychological well being of each participant, as he or she demonstrated the ability to recognize and respond to the stresses of higher education. I gained this understanding through our overall interactions, where participants willingly and assuredly shared stories of significant sacrifice. They did so with humility and patience as I sought to learn as much as possible, by slowing the process and opening myself to new discoveries (Vagle, 2014). Yet, through our journey together every rich description was shared with the fullness and confidence of one who has come through the trial and expects to do so again. I believe the ease with which each participant opened him or herself to the study demonstrated a comprehension of not only the difficulty of what was experienced, but also a sense of what was gained through the experience.

**Theme 6: Autonomy through the uniqueness of being first generation.** Early in the data gathering process I gained a distinct impression that the experiences of each participant, while individualized, collectively exhibited a sense of uniqueness about being a first generation university student. It was very important to my participants, perhaps even subconsciously, that each experience spoke to the positionality of a first generation student. By this, it seemed that students would describe their experiences framed by discussions concerning how they perceived that it would have been different for a student whose parents had graduated from a college or university. They experienced the autonomous journey of pursuing a university degree from the unique perspective of being the first member of the family to achieve that level of accomplishment. Recall Anita, who described the pressure of being the first person in her family to graduate, acknowledged how it would change the way her family would be viewed within the Indian-American community. It is as though being a first generation university student has
contributed to the fostering of autonomy, and subsequently, to the ability to persist within the institution.

According to the literature (Engle & Tinto, 2008), and affirmed by my participants, first generation students assume quite a different perspective from those students who come from a home where one or more parent hold a postsecondary degree. This is not surprising as the literature is saturated with studies identifying the struggles associated with being a first generation university student (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Hottiger & Rose, 2006; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Continually, participants expressed experiences of feeling at a distinct disadvantage due to a lack of understanding concerning procedures such as the application process, enrolling in classes, and applying for financial assistance. Participants communicated these struggles in such a way as to suggest that deciding how to address each challenge yielded an opportunity to grow. These disadvantages provoked study participants to make a purposeful choice of either working harder to overcome the slight, or resigning themselves to the belief that it would be impossible to continue and dropout. By identifying as a first generation student, and taking on the added pressures and weight as the first member of the family to attend college, my participants purposefully engaged in a process of directing their studies (Kekes, 2011).

Study participants described times where they felt as though they needed support, but experienced a delay in finding the assistance due to a lack of institutional knowledge, which is rarely the case with second-generation students. Often children of parents who attended college are provided with the experience and knowledge of the parents, which is particularly true with regard to identifying institutional resources. Turning to the literature we can see that Drozd (2008), Stolle-McAllister (2011), and McGlynn (2011) affirm the existence of the barriers
described by study participants and thus confirm the findings of Ward et al. (2012) in the
description of first generation students as the “invisible minority” (p. 14). Often participants
spoke of the inability to engage in the academic community because of the need to either work or
care for family members, which hampered their ability to become fully incorporated. Brianna
described her struggle with trying to connect with campus life, but being weighed down by the
need to first learn how to navigate the complex system of institutional offices and departments.
It appeared that participants wanted to communicate the legitimacy of their struggles, and in so
doing, emphasizing the internal growth needed to meet those challenges.

As participants described their experiences of the academic journey, the lack of family
knowledge and financial contributions were discussed in detail, which Woosley and Shepler
(2011) describe as a lack of cultural and social capital. For example, when Carline described her
feelings of frustration over her family’s lack of understanding concerning institutional protocols
involving student loans and program requirements, Terenzin et al. (1994) would acknowledge
this deficit and elaborate the advantages of having parents who have first-hand university
knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, through the development of autonomy, participants
would find a way to continue along their journey.

Through the communication of these struggles, I believe that participants where revealing
the manner in which they were tasked with opening themselves to new experiences, thus
internalizing the desire to move beyond the accomplishments of their families. This intrinsic
drive to achieve seems to speak to the urge of reaching for one’s full, most robust potential, and
is routinely described in the literature of autonomy (Raz, 1986). In the process of striving to
better one’s position in life, particularly through adult education, it involves reflecting upon
personal values and then exercising the freedom to pursue one’s dreams based upon those values
(Mezirow, 1990). Experiencing autonomy through the challenges of being a first generation university student, each participant demonstrated the process of recognizing his or her position and then freely choosing to do something about it. This study finding is consistent with the current literature involving first generation students, and at the same time it makes each struggle personal through an evaluation of the internal desire and motivation to improve one’s position.

Relevance to the Literature Review

Interpretations of the findings were consistent with the literature review concerning autonomy and served to affirm many established conceptions of this socially constructed concept, through not all. As established by Dworkin (1988) autonomy is a combination of the desires or motivations (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990) to act as well as the action itself (McAvoy, 2013; Raz, 1986). Participants in this study affirmed his conception, as individuals consistently expressed their experiences of autonomy with an internal motivation to act through self-reflection (Morse, 1997) and the ability or capacity to act independently (Buchner, 1904). The findings support Kant’s (1797/1965, 1784/1996) elemental conception involving the individual’s freedom to choose for him or herself the best course of action in life, of course with the exception being that Kant did not acknowledge the ‘feelings’ to act, as established by my participants. Rather, he relied upon following a sense of duty to act based on reason. Kant positioned the concept of autonomy within the individual’s accountability to respond in self-subjection to a logical, moral command (Schneewind, 1998). Findings from this study fall more in line, perhaps, with the thoughts of Mill (1859/1985) in that each individual used his or her faculties to exercise the freedom to self-direct the learning endeavor. He states (p. 34):

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and
judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.

Within Mills writing, I can see a glimpse of the themes from the findings such as intrinsic motivation, self-reflection, resisting conformity and so forth.

Further, participants described the manner in which the individual exercised the conception of self-authorship as presented by Raz (1986), and through thick descriptions I was able to clearly see the individual’s capacity to stand firm in the identified action when confronted with external forces such as coercion (Dodson, 1997; Fienberg, 1973; Hinchman, 1996; Kekes, 2011). The findings affirm the sense of self-direction and self-determination associated with autonomy, and support the notion that such are characteristics of a self-authoring individual.

Through the findings, we see that study participants experienced greater fulfillment as self-authors (Rawls, 1999; Raz, 1986) who determined their actions in relation to the college experience. This greater fulfillment is the result of an educational journey progressing toward reaching one’s full life potential, which correlates nicely with the philosophies of Bruner (1996), Eisner (1985), and Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904). For example, it was Bruner who advanced the idea that in reaching for one’s full potential, the individual must first learn how to learn and then self-direct the process. This is not unlike Eisner, who insisted that as learners self-seek to reach their full potential, they represent “living creatures attempting to broaden and deepen the quality of their experience” (p. 70). And recall that Kant discusses the educational endeavor as something that constitutes an ever-evolving process where the student, through self-direction, ascends to the height of his or her educational desires. Kant advocates that the educational journey is for the equipping of individuals who become capable of making independent life choices through self-regulation, reason, and reflection.
The findings connect the experiences of study participants to reaching one’s full potential in the pursuit of a university degree, which embraces the freedom of self-actualization (Cahn, 2009; Eisner & Valance, 1979) to decide on a direction and then pursue that decision through action. Additionally, the greater fulfillment as experienced by participants of this study, speaks to the sense of freedom espoused by French existentialist Sartre (1943/1992) in that each individual recognizes his or her responsibility to choose for him or herself. His position is that the individual is endowed with the freedom to make choices, but recognizes that in life choices are inescapable. Study participants reached autonomous decisions, based upon the understanding that they embodied the freedom to choose and then made choices as a consequence of living. These two conditions merge, provoking a consciousness as a free being able to pursue his or her idea of the good life (Schneewind, 1998). Certainly that parallels with both Plato (trans 1935) and Aristotle (as cited in Pérez & Ziemke, 2007), as fulfillment contributes to the happiness experienced by the individual.

The findings also concur with Harvard Professor Kindlon (2001) who writes extensively about the need to raise children that possess the capacity to withstand criticism and thus respond to that criticism appropriately. Participants from this study demonstrated the ability to withstand adversity and the coercion of others and persevere on the academic journey, which in essence speaks to criticism. The lack of such preparation is linked to students withdrawing and disengaging from the academic endeavor. Participants of the current study described the experiences of facing criticism or adversity, and rather than withdrawing, they engaged autonomously and continued on the predetermined course of action. The findings also reveal the participants’ ability to not only withstand criticism, but to actually stand firm in opposition to the
will of others, which confirms Kindlon’s suggestion that such an individual will persist upon the academic continuum.

Findings from the study also acknowledge the literature concerning the plight of first generation university students. Universally, participants described the manner in which they lacked the necessary social and economic capital to truly compete in an environment where resources played such a pivotal role (Strayhorn, 2007). The findings speak to the advantage second-generation college students have in relation to the knowledge and experience possessed by their parents. This is affirmed by Pascarella et al. (2004) who notes, “first generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education” (p. 250). The findings also affirmed the perception of the expectation that students whose parents graduated from college were explicitly required by them to graduate, which is in line with the findings of both Drozd (2008) and Mehta et al. (2011).

As revealed through the review of the literature, we know that students of postsecondary education who make the transition from being a passive learner depending upon others for success, to one who internalizes and drives the learning process, is more likely to persist within the academic community (Barefoote, 2008; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Seidman, 2012). The findings of this study harmonize with this thinking, as participants described how they became active and self-authoring during the journey of pursuing a university degree. Through the interpretation of the findings we see how this transition moved the participant from a position of following the will of others to one where he or she interjects the motivational force to reach an independent conclusion. This motivation is discussed by Pintrich and Degroot (1990), Eccles and Wigfield (2002), and Zimmerman and Bandura (2000) and is corroborated in this study.
Additionally, Brookfield (1984) indicated that in order for adult education to hold significant meaning, the learner must first play an active role in the decision-making process concerning the educational experience. The findings of this study are aligned with his theory of adult education and affirmed by the active role study participants took during the academic journey. We see that as participants engaged in self-regulation and self-determination, as ascribed by Pintrich (2000) and Ryan and Deci (2000), they also experienced greater satisfaction and a sense of efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000) and the willingness to persist within the educational community (Tinto, 1975). Erikson (1950) indicated that students who exercise a greater sense of self-direction, as demonstrated by study participants, also develop a greater sense of self-worth and an overall sense of self-satisfaction. Study findings complement his assertion as participants seemed to develop greater confidence through their autonomy fostering academic journey.

Hussey and Smith (2010) indicate that in order to successfully make the transition into higher education, students must first develop the “self-confidence and motivations” (p. 157) to engage in the academic community. Study findings speak to this charge as participants have developed self-confidence through the experiences of resisting conformity and have refined the intrinsic motivations through the experiences associated with self-reflection. The findings further indicate that students have engaged in a process of action, which includes the actualization of an internal locus of control, thus allowing them to engage as they determine for themselves. This process connects with Aviram (1993) who advances the idea that students who are self-sufficient tend to be more capable of greater levels of academic achievement.

**Contributions to the Literature.** Study contributions to the literature can be seen when we consider the trend of undergraduates who are experiencing “severe psychological” distress (Gallagher & Taylor, 2011, p. 4) due to academic performance and resource allocation
(Heiligenstein & Guenther, 1996) as well as the inability to exercise control over the college experience (Dalgard et. al, 2006). From the findings, we can see that study participants experienced significant barriers, yet through the fostering of autonomy each individual was able to cope and adapt to the psychological distress and then persist within the environment. Consider Carline’s predicament when she was unaware of how to “handle the financial situation” of paying for postsecondary education. Her circumstances were new and daunting, yet, she persevered stating, “Take out as many loans as you need. It’s worth it in the end…it’s an investment in yourself”. In the absence of autonomy, Carline could have easily withdrawn in fear and thus failed to reach her goal. Perseverance is a vital component in developing autonomy as we can see through the experience of my participants, and incorporating a purposeful design to foster autonomy within university students may potentially reduce individual distress and allow the student to remain on track.

This purposeful design for developing autonomy would present new avenues of freedoms and opportunities not previously experienced by students. It would embrace the Personal Relevance Theory, as discussed by Petrina (1992), where students; 1.) recognize that they have a voice in the course concerning class topics as well as forms of assessment, and 2.) students must exercise that voice as indicated by course requisites. Further, a curriculum that seeks to foster autonomy would require students to devote a specified number of hours each academic year in service. It may sound counter-intuitive in terms of ‘requiring’ students to become engaged; however, while the freedom to make decisions is inherent in each individual (Fienberg, 1973) fostering autonomy is not something that happens naturally. Kant (as cited in Cahn, 2009) asserts that the only way for humankind to emerge from the constraints of self-sustained immaturity is through an education that forces the individual to exercise both the capacity and
courage to make decisions. Taylor (2005) affirms Kant’s stance, and advocates for the development of the autonomous characteristics of “self-authorship...integrity and authentic” (p. 602), which is in itself through a purposeful design. McAvoy (2013) also contends that fostering autonomy is accomplished through an intentional approach that allows the individual to acquire both the “skills and the disposition to make well-informed choices” (p. 483).

This approach to curriculum promotes an eagerness to employ these newly found liberties, in the pursuit of self-exploration and the acquisition of knowledge (Barefoot, 2006). It is even more important as it pertains to the transitional period in which students must develop their contextual skills and self-awareness, as it relates to the ability to successfully negotiate oneself through the educational system. Perhaps even more importantly, the student must be purposefully presented with the opportunities to engage in and develop complex relationships, which are critical to both academic and social success (Hoffman, 2005). The reason behind the call for implementing an autonomy fostering curriculum can be seen through the work of Acar (2011), who describes the need for our society to develop “social cohesion” (p. 2), which embodies “tolerance, responsibility, democratic participation, and mutual respect” (p. 3).

The study findings add to the literature by legitimizing the concept of fostering student autonomy as a means of ensuring personal fulfillment and ultimately degree attainment. In this we recognize the positive influence of learner autonomy within the context (Holec, 1981; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987, 2000; Zoghi & Dehghan, 2012) and extend that concept to personal or individual autonomy (Buchner, 1904; Darwall, 2006; Schinkel, 2010) and to the entire college experience. The findings suggest that students who develop autonomy experience greater fulfillment, academic success, and the ability to persist.
Current student retention and persistence theories seek to support the student once in college and therefore assumes that the individual possesses the autonomous capacity to take advantage of college life programming (Tinto, 1975, 1986, 2005). The troubling fact remains that far too many students arrive on campus and lack the capacity to become fully engaged and incorporated into the academic community. By this, the student may lack the self-direction to pursue campus initiatives that provide avenues for transferring institutional knowledge and building supportive relationships. For example, at the study location students are provided with a vast array of opportunities to become involved within the academic community. Many of these opportunities are presented through the University Program Board (UPB) and a weekly Saturday night alcohol alternative extravaganza called Late-Nite. When combined, these two groups engage more than fifty thousand attendees throughout each academic year. Whether in the form of activities fairs, social clubs, or special interest group event programming the student must first decide to become engaged and then act upon that decision.

Tinto (1975, 2005) indicates that if students choose to remain uninvolved, they experience a higher percentage of dropping out. Further, a result of failing to become incorporated can be cataclysmic, according to Benton et al. (2003), as students develop high levels of anxiety and psychological distress in their attempt to navigate the unfamiliar responsibilities of higher education in isolation. Theoretically, as the student begins to become incorporated within the community, he or she will slowly loosen the bonds of previously established relationships and develop new college level relationships that assist the student into adulthood. This is Tinto’s Theory of Institutional Departure, wherein the individual transitions from being viewed as a dependent and into the role of an active, self-sustaining adult. Envision the transition that occurs in the relationship between a high school graduate and his or her
parents in relation to that of a college graduate. The shift involves a parent-child relationship to
one of a parent–adult child relationship (Chickering, 2010).

For many students, the postsecondary experience represents the first time where they
have both the freedom and encouragement to engage in the organic activities of establishing an
adult identity (Tinto, 1986). Regardless of the excitement level, this new phase of individual
growth can be uncharted territory, as many students lack the autonomous experience of self-
authorship to adequately adjust to these new challenges. For the student who has not previously
fostered the autonomous capacity to self-direct his or her actions, which are based upon
internally reflected attitudes and motivations, they would benefit from developing those skills at
the postsecondary level, as established in this study.

**Unanticipated Considerations.** Autonomy holds a romantic position within our modern
society. The idea that an individual has the capacity to author his or her life free of the imposing
authority of another seems to be commonplace in our democratic community. Yet for many,
such as those who hold a poststructuralist or postmodernist perspective of power and agency,
autonomy is a complex conception that questions human freedom due to the nature of living in
an evolving set of conditions that have been evolving since the beginning of time (Davies, 1991).
It would be difficult to engage in a conversation of autonomy without realizing that who we are,
our genetic makeup, our being born into a certain nation, family, and discursive and historical
context, contributes to our being. Within this perspective, much of who we are or who we have
become has been determined by events that remain far beyond our control. Influences such as
social, historical, and cultural preconditions inform our very ability to think and understand.

As noted in chapter 2, the poststructuralist perspective lies in opposition to the humanist
viewpoint of agency, as it is shaped by traditionally held structures of power in terms of capital,
I’m drawn back, time and again to Young’s (1986) sentiment that “our conception of ourselves” (p. 19) is the foundation upon which an individual is capable of self-authoring. With the dawning appreciation that my conception of myself manipulates my ability to self-author, I am connected to a Marxian perspective in that autonomy within the context of a modern capitalist state, such as America, there may in fact be a hidden system of control at work. For example, through a sense of formal freedom I have the ability to choose, for myself, whether or not to apply and enroll at an institution of higher learning. However, I may not have the real freedom to pursue that decision based upon my previous academic preparation and financial means to pay for the desired education. In this sense, the illusionary formal freedom of the sentiment that college is for everyone hides the reality that not everyone is prepared to be successful in the pursuit of a college degree. I must therefore resist viewing autonomy as a basic process of deciding and acting for oneself without taking into account the social and political conditions that inform our real freedoms.

Autonomy is socially centered where freedoms are positioned within the context of political, social, and economic conditions (Feinberg, 1978). Such conditions influence one’s ability to act as well as the intrinsic formation of one’s desire to act. The very manner in which we view ourselves influences our ability to become autonomous. When I reflect upon US history and the atrocities of slavery I can only begin to speculate about the challenges faced by human beings who were set free after a lifetime of control. If in fact Feinberg is correct in stating that our social and historical experiences guide our desires and actions, it is possible that the very concept of autonomy would have been beyond the reach of newly freed slaves, many of whom viewed themselves as property. Through the brutality of experiences that served to inform the individual how to act, what to think (or not to think), where to sleep and so forth, the intrinsic
desire to act based upon a lifetime of being treated like property, would be tragically reduced. I considered the idea that as a person is physically, emotionally, and socially forced into submission, he or she will begin to view him or herself as subservient, and therefore, affect the formation of internal desires to act autonomously. I base this speculation on my past experiences of studying the social and behavioral challenges of newly released prisoners. Many ex-convicts have identified the fear and anxiety associated with being released, as they had become institutionalized unable to effectively navigate the freedoms of living in society.

Findings from this study are in agreement with Anderson’s (2013) proclamation that “autonomy is not something one is born having” (p. 357) instead it is a normative status one achieves after developing autonomous capacities. And through the findings, I pause to consider the structures of power and privilege that are constantly exuding influence upon the individual. I deliberate upon what it must have been like, as a marginalized member of society to navigate the forms of institutional racism for Anita, Erik, and James. I reflect upon the potential hidden challenges endured by Miranda who at 61 years of age returned to the university and graduated, when many of her contemporaries mocked her decision. Like Foucault (as cited in Wain, 1998), I consider if the concept of personal autonomy may in fact be masking a type of control or design that serves to perpetuate accepted inequalities. Surely, as individuals are socially constructed themselves, and are educated under the jurisprudence of a governing entity, it is possible to view autonomy not as one’s freedom, but rather as one’s outward manifestation of indoctrination. In this viewpoint, an understanding of autonomy must be positioned in such a way that accounts for social influences, that in turn serve to manipulate the individual’s development of self (Donchin, 2000).
Implications

With the understanding that postsecondary education enrollment will continue to climb in the US (Schneider, 2010), statistics supported by the NCES (2014) indicate that student attrition will also increase. The interest and intention of this study was to gain a better understanding of how first generation university students experience autonomy and to consider if that experience influences academic persistence. Accordingly, it was Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) who facilitated this study through his suggestion that any rational society would prepare future generations through a system of education that produces a self-directing population.

The findings offer room to speculate over the inclusion of an autonomy-fostering curriculum within higher education. The benefits of promoting learner autonomy are well established (Garcia & Pintrich, 1996; Holec, 1981) and those benefits are confirmed within the findings of the study. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity for educators and student affairs professionals to pause and consider creating collaborative coursework that moves beyond the classroom and engages with academic community activities that foster student autonomy. I believe that the findings challenge the traditional university student experience, and bridge academic and student affairs with a curriculum that allows a student to identify his or her intrinsic motivation, and then engage more fully in the educational process.

This study offers new insight into avenues of fulfillment that may serve to combat the ever-present trend of premature student departure. This insight extends our understanding of learner autonomy, and its connection to student fulfillment (Holec, 1981) with individual autonomy, and its connection to personal fulfillment (Rawls, 1999; Raz, 1986). I envision developing, in students, the ability to withstand the coercion or will of others, as a means of helping them avoid the increasing level of psychological distress currently associated with the
pursuits of higher education. Recall that possessing the ability to choose for oneself, with or without coercion, is a fundamental aspect of autonomy (Buchner, 1904; Cahn, 2009; Dworkin, 1988). It is Sher-Censor et al. (2011) who argued that students who lack the capacity to exercise any level of control over their lives, such as found in traditionally structured college coursework, experienced significant negative emotions contributing to student attrition (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Research has demonstrated that students experience a greater sense of fulfillment and academic success as they engage in a learning environment that provides both the opportunity and the design for self-determination and self-efficacy (Holec, 1981; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This sentiment was affirmed through the experiences of study participants, who even in the face of adversity experienced a sense of fulfillment as they determined for themselves what action to take. Simply recall the meaningful experiences described by James as a campus activist, who experienced fulfillment because he was “doing exactly what [he was]…supposed to be doing”. If we accept the concept that students experience greater success through an environment that encourages autonomy, it would seem equally true that designing the entire college experience in a similar fashion would likewise lead to academic persistence and degree attainment. As revealed by Zimmerman and Bandura (1994), students who perceive that they have the autonomy to successfully make informed decisions about the direction of class related assignments, then transfer that self-authorship to the entire course, leading to greater success and persistence. The same should hold true for students of higher education and yield similar results. This idea is given greater credence in a recent study by Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013), where the findings indicated that an autonomy-fostering environment, within higher education, was linked to student satisfaction and academic persistence within a given course.
We can, therefore, assume that a campus-wide emphasis on student autonomy has the potential to lead to a greater sense of fulfillment and garner a higher level of degree attainment.

For nearly five decades researchers have sought ways to support student incorporation (Tinto, 1975) and engagement (Astin, 1985) within the academic community as a means for improving student persistence. In brief, the concept encompasses opportunities for students to become intimately involved with the campus life, and in return students will, through an internal desire to stay, strive to remain members of the community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This process involves a “complex series of socio-psychological interactions between the student and the institutional environment” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 178, p. 348), which serves to strengthen the bond between student and institution. The difficulty here lies not in the opportunity to become incorporated, but rather involves a consideration as to whether or not the student has developed, like study participants, an internal locus of control that allows him or her to become incorporated.

As a means of efficiently educating individuals for such participation, it is important to develop the autonomous credentials of each student. This occurs through artful instruction where autonomy related characteristics such as creativity, authenticity, and originality remain highly coveted (Petrina, 1992). Such attributes lead to increased student fulfillment (Holec, 1981) and subsequently, academic success (Clifford, 2007; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987). Taylor (2005) advances the notion that it is autonomy that “celebrates creative self-authorship and encourages the development of those virtues…integrity and authenticity” (p. 602). Ultimately, it is through the development of autonomy where the needs of both the individual, in his or her pursuit of education, and society, in its need for active participatory citizenship, will be served.
Strengths and Limitations

This study presents a strong description of how first generation university students engage in autonomous behavior. The inclusion of thick descriptions is based upon the openness of participants to share their stories and their willingness to contribute to the body of literature. Through the findings both educators and student affairs professionals are provided with an understanding that students are more successful when presented with opportunities to self-direct and would benefit by incorporating this understanding into academic and social programming. Again, based upon Kant’s educational philosophy (as cited in Buchner, 1904) learners must be taught how to direct the learning process, which is accomplished through an autonomy-fostering educational environment. Recall, Schinkel’s (2010) liberal theory concerning autonomy-promoting education, “it is in the interest of the collective (society, the state); it is in the interest of the individual; and autonomy is intrinsically valuable” (p. 99).

Bruner (1996) as well as Eisner and Vallance (1974) would agree and advocate for the notion of a self-actualization curriculum where students learn personal fulfillment through the discovery of skills and the freedom to use those skills. The sense of freedom to author one’s experience, which can be further cultivated through educational design, would allow the student to become incorporated within the academic community through the exercise of intrinsic motivation. I believe that a significant strength of this study is revealed as it demonstrates the benefit of extending our understanding of autonomy from the confines of a specific course or activity and moves the conversation to include the benefits of fostering autonomy on a broader level. In essence, the study presses us to consider student autonomy from a more inclusive perspective that allows individual self-authorship to permeate the overall student experience.
As with any qualitative research project, limitations abound due to location and time restrictions. In this case, data were collected at a midsized Midwest public university over the course of two and a half months. While participants were purposefully selected due to his or her experience with the phenomenon under investigation, and do in fact represent a diverse sample, it is possible that additional experiences were not captured. Also, as all face-to-face interviews were conducted over a relatively short period of time, it is conceivable that a further prolonged exposure could have provided a more in-depth understanding of autonomy.

Also, while this study references the cultural and social capital of first generation university students as a recognized sub-group (Pike & Kuh, 2005), an approach that assumes a critical lens would have the freedom to consider the development of autonomy through the complex structures of power and privilege found within society. Consider Critical Race Theory (CTR) for a moment. This lens acknowledges the manner in which racism is woven into the very fabric our society and has infiltrated nearly every aspect of life. With the understanding that white privilege is an institutionalized source of power, it therefore, must be taken into account when researching a socially constructed concept like autonomy. From a position of whiteness, it is easy to articulate autonomy in that one need only make a decision and then act upon that decision. Yet, for those who have been marginalized and who have historically experienced social constraints such as generational poverty, eugenics, and other forms of oppression, may not have the contextual knowledge to articulate such a freedom or the freedom to act on their autonomous choices.

The utilization of a critical theory, as a lens for this study, would potentially provide alternative findings. This lens would seek to examine the historical inequalities and oppression of member groups within society. For example, instead of the findings speaking to one’s
perseverance in general terms, a critical lens would explore concepts like the hidden curriculum that influenced the individual’s ability to persevere. The hidden curriculum is based upon the acknowledgment that students learn more than content within the school setting. For example, culturally speaking those students who grew up in home environments that do not reflect White middle class America could interact differently with teachers causing them to unintentionally experience difficulty adjusting to the classroom setting. Similarly, students who do not see themselves in course content through text, imagery, or other representation could view themselves as inferior to those being portrayed. Such an examination would provide rich details from the perspective of individuals who have experienced institutional racism or oppression. If viewed through a critical lens, imagine how different the educational experiences would be for Miranda, having graduated from the university at age 61, as opposed James who is an African American with a disability and will be graduating at age 24. A critical lens would consider the positionality of each participant, whereby exploring his or her life experiences in relation to such areas as the inequality of educational access, the social disparities between dominant and marginalized members of society, and the institutional power of whiteness within most college campuses. Through the recognition that participants have grown up within these social and cultural contexts, the study would then seek to better understand autonomy within the power structures of our society.

As a result of not utilizing a critical lens within this study, the investigation into first generation university student autonomy remains somewhat limited. For example, Lareau (2007, 2011) discussed the manner in which the methods of raising children often differ according to social class. While children of middle class families typically experience highly structured schedules, where children are involved in the negotiation of activities, children of poor or
working class families often experience extended periods of unstructured time and have little to no voice in the activities. Therefore, students who have learned to exercise their voice in relation to how they will spend their time are better prepared to succeed within higher education than those who have not. According to Lareau, these middle class students are better prepared at navigating institutional power structures and have become proficient in managing their time, which are critical aspects of being successful in higher education.

Autonomy, itself, is a socially constructed concept embodying a multitude of desirable characteristics, and yet within the context of this study I am unable ponder the influence of its development in relation to the intersection of race, culture, and society. A study that probes deeper into the socio-cultural composition of participants and the intersection of race, power, and privilege may provide further insight.

Finally, because previously established relationships with study participants existed, response bias was a legitimate concern. It is possible that participants misinterpreted my reactions during each interview and subsequently answered in a way that served to satiate an imagined need. As a means of diminishing the effects of response bias and as described in Chapter 4, I utilized member checks, which served to improve the accuracy and the credibility of the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By restating or summarizing the collected information, during the interview, as well as providing a summary of the transcribed data and findings near the end of the study, I was able to ensure participant authenticity and corroborate my interpretations as well as the results of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Little, if any, research exists concerning the personal perspectives of first generation university students on the concept of autonomy along with its various conceptions. Not
surprisingly, there exists a significant body of research for learner autonomy, as contextualized within the field of education, yet again little concerning this conception of autonomy within higher education. More often than not, autonomy related research is localized to a specific classroom or activity-based setting, and thus explores autonomy as temporary or otherwise limited condition. By this, I mean that autonomy is rarely studied within the context of higher education, except in relation to a finite period of time such as in a course or specific activity. While there are examples of research concerning autonomy within the field of higher education, it too remains confined to the context of an academic course or restricted to a specific assignment. The understanding gained through this study provides a basis on which to conduct future research, as participants experience the academic journey from an autonomous perspective. The next logical step to better understand autonomy as a factor that influences student persistence would be to conduct a similar study involving participants, first generation university students, who have dropped out or prematurely stopped the educational journey. It would be significant to view the findings of that study in relation to the findings contained above.

Future research would benefit from a longitudinal exploration of the lived experiences of first generation university students in relation to autonomy and degree attainment. While this study captured the essence of autonomy, as experienced by current or recently graduated university students, identifying and following a group of first generation university students from freshman enrollment through graduation would greatly contribute to the literature. Such an endeavor would allow the researcher to gather a multitude of data during a prolonged exposure, thus capturing the transformative process of fostering such a complex phenomenon. Data from that type of research could potentially be utilized to identify specific periods that serve to either
foster or regress the development of autonomy, and at which point a particular intervention should be applied.

Finally, as a means of deeply exploring the autonomous journey of first generation university students, future research would benefit if conducted in developing nations where autonomy is, perhaps, an unfamiliar concept. Certainly the notion of autonomy, as a socially constructed idea, is richly ingrained into the liberal capitalist societies of the West, where the individual serves his or her purposes in the form of action or inaction. Yet, Dodson (1991) would suggest that it is through the development of autonomy where the individual will seek to live, under collective governance, with the conviction of equal freedoms as rational human beings. The idea being that each individual self-governs his or her life, yet does so in a manner that serves the good of the collective.

I speculate that even those cultures where individuals live out their lives in such a manner as to place the needs of the collective above the needs of the individual do so autonomously. This conjecture draws us back to Dworkin (1988), who suggests that while we may have one concept of autonomy, which is the act as well as the motivations that inform the act, we in fact have many conceptions. The individual who self-sacrifices for the good of the group may be doing so through an ongoing autonomous perspective. Reconsider the discussion earlier concerning my unanticipated considerations. Much of who we are or who we have become has been determined by events that remain far beyond our control, such as being born into a community that values the interests of the group over the individual. As such, the influences of social, historical, and cultural preconditions inform and constrain the individual’s ability to think about and understand his or her conception of autonomy.
In the West, the notion of autonomy seems to hold a position of high esteem and is even romanticized, yet has become mired in mundane pursuits. We seem to have deviated from working together, as autonomous individuals who choose to do so, and instead strive to embrace the gains associated with living in a capitalist society. To more richly explore student autonomy, within a context where self-authorship has been historically repressed, would provide a comparative understanding of the conditions in which it is identified and fostered. The understanding gained from that type of research would provide a level of application that could enhance the global community through increased education.

Concluding Remarks

Chapter 5 served to present an interpretation of the study findings, as well as implications for those findings, strengths and limitations of the study, and finally recommendations for future research. The participant group of first generation university students from this study experienced the autonomous academic journey in a variety unique ways, yet when viewed through the tradition of phenomenology six overlying themes emerged. Through a sense of purpose, participants acknowledged an internal motivation to be the first member of the family to pursue a university degree. Next, it was revealed that participants experienced the academic journey through a sense of introspection, where each individual purposefully, critically evaluated the decision-making process. Participants also came to the realization that the capacity to engage was in reality an internal locus of control, completely under the authority of the actor. Participants even experienced the academic journey through the exercise of standing firm on an internally-driven conviction, which often placed them at odds with popular opinion. Through perseverance, participants fostered the autonomous capacity to face adversity, even fail, only to rise again and continue on the journey. Finally, study participants experienced the academic
journey through the unique lens of being a first generation university student complete with the perceived disadvantages of being the first in the family to attend an institution of higher learning.

According to the NCES (2014), approximately 1.2 million students will drop out of high school this year along with approximately 520,000 students of postsecondary education. This epidemic of unrealized potential is a recipe for socioeconomic catastrophe. While the reasons behind this yearly mass exodus are varied, I believe that this growing tide could be stemmed through an educational emphasis of fostering student autonomy. We know that learner autonomy within a specific course equates itself to academic success, student confidence, and persistence (Garcia & Pintrich, 1996; Holec, 1981, Petrina, 1992; O’Donnell et al., 2013; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). From the literature we also know that aspiring to reach one’s full potential includes the fostering of autonomous characteristics such as creativity, authenticity, and originality (Bruner, 1996; Eisner, 1985; Federici, 2013; Plato, trans 1945; Rawls, 1999; Raz, 1986). Finally, we also know that reaching for one’s full potential manifests itself in the form of self-authorship, which fosters the virtues of authenticity and creativity (Taylor, 2005) that in turn support further development (Anderson, 2013).

As noted above, higher education is not alone when facing the epidemic of student attrition, as evidenced by the NECS where the average high school freshman graduation rate (AFGR) in American public schools is 75.5% (Chapman et al., 2011). As an educator, this implies that we are failing to support and develop the other 24.5% of students, who may never realize their potential. The economic and societal costs of student attrition are significant and new approaches to retention initiatives, such as autonomy through education, must be considered.
It was Fisher (1961) who communicated the importance of education as the most vital aspect of a democratic government, as a means of developing a citizenry capable of living in a participatory society. As noted in Chapter 2, a democracy requires the active participation of an educated and autonomous population, engaged through a shared system of laws, values, and principles, in what Lucas Thorpe (2010) labels a “substantial composite” (p. 461). The findings of this study communicate the willingness and capability of participants to reach independent conclusions and even resist the coercion of others in the process. Recall that Martin stood his ground in opposition to the will of the majority concerning class related activities. It would seem appropriate that our democratic society would welcome the same characteristics displayed by Martin, especially in light of the participatory nature of democracy. In our system of government, citizens must critically evaluate candidates and choose to vote for those with whom they most identify, as opposed to being unduly coerced by those who hold dissenting opinions.

Current educational scholars such as Fumoto (2011), Pinar (2012), and Zhao (2012) entice us to believe that creativity, educational entrepreneurship, and originality are a necessity for learning in the 21st century. Further, the participatory nature of our global modern society (Jenkins, 2006) calls for individuals to possess the skills of cooperation, collaboration, and concise communication (Booth, 2008; Rosefsky Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). All such sentiments are identical to the common characteristics of individuals who exercise autonomy (Schneewind, 2005) and are traits that according to Heyneman (2003), McAvoy (2013), and Thorpe (2010) are to be aspired to by members of a modern democratic state. It, therefore, seems logical that we weave autonomy-fostering activities into the social and academic fabric of higher education as a means for slowing the plague of student attrition.
The findings of this study lead me to further consider how fostering autonomy may serve to support students in their educational journey. It was Morse (2004) who advanced the idea that failing to prepare all students with the “opportunity to become full participants in our society” (p. 267) is tantamount to overruling Brown v. Board of Education. It was his position that failing to prepare all students to use technology in the 21st century would leave some students behind, and therefore, unable to participate fully in living within a modern world. In this sense as we know from chapter 2 that a postsecondary degree represents a divergence regarding the quality of one’s life (Baum et al., 2013), I believe that we should exhaust every conceivable option for ensuring that all students are successful in college. We must not continue to overlook the manner in which we are under-preparing first generation university students to fully participate due to a lack of educational attainment (Ward et al., 2012).

Through the discussion of the findings and in conclusion, like Kant (as cited in Buchner, 1904) I believe that the strength of education is not rooted in the content, but rather in the student’s autonomous capacity to pursue the knowledge embedded in that content. We can provide open access to every level of education, but if we do not foster the student’s ability to intrinsically pursue knowledge, they may become frustrated, bored, and eventually abandon the academic journey. The participants of this study have articulated this idea as evidenced through the descriptions of their experiences. Each individual decided for him or herself the best course of action to pursue, as they plotted a navigational course through the complexities of pursuing a university degree. Through the obstacles and barriers, as well as through the laughs and tears of being a first generation student, these individuals remained steadfast as each captained his or her ship and attained a university degree.
In a similar fashion, I view the journey of my participants through the words of William Ernest Henley. I envision these participants, as they enter an environment that seems dark and foreboding due to their lack of preparation and knowledge, yet each braces for the turbulence that follows. These participants choose to proudly engage day after day, as they face the brutality of falling short, anxiety over securing funds, and the pain of standing against opposition to their convictions. They continue upon the journey knowing that should they falter, with the hopes and dreams of the entire family, an even worse fate awaits. They view the trials and allure of deviating from the course and yet feel unmoved. They will determine for themselves the course to take. They assume authorship of their lives, as masters working toward their goal.

Invictus
BY WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.
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Appendix A: Participant Request

Miller, Joshua L.
Request for Participation
Email introduction / Participant Request

The Autonomous Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First Generation College Students who Persist

Dear (Ball State University Student / Alumnus),

As you are aware I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Studies interested in researching the experiences of first generation college students or recent graduates. For my dissertation, I am conducting research on autonomy and college persistence of first generation students and I am interested in interviewing first generation college students or recent graduates. I would appreciate your participation in my study, as I know that your experiences in persevering through the rigors of college would serve the needs of other students.

In order to participate in this study you must:
1.) Be at least 18 years of age
2.) Identify as a first generation college student or recent graduate, where neither parent nor guardian has graduated college
3.) Be within two (2) semesters of graduation for currently enrolled Ball State University students or having graduated from Ball State University within two (2) years of this study

The study will consist of one (1) rapport building meeting lasting approximately 15 - 20 minutes to review the process and two (2) semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one (1) hour each.

If you find yourself unable to participate in my study, I would appreciate you sending my contact information to others with whom you feel would help to inform my study.

Please contact me, Joshua Miller, the Principal Investigator, if you wish to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

If you have any questions, please contact Joshua Miller, Principal Investigator, jlmiller2@bsu.edu or Dr. John Ambrosio, Faculty Advisor, jambrosio@bsu.edu.

Ball State University’s Institutional Review Board has approved this study.
IRBNet Protocol Number: # 649261-1
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Study Title
The Autonomous Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First Generation College Students who Persist

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this study is to explore the conditions that serve to foster and develop autonomy, which is contextualized through the lived experiences of first generation college students who persist in attaining their desired degree. As it relates to the lived experiences of first generation college students, this study is not looking to simply report on the experience of autonomy, but rather explore with the participants, how they lived through those experiences. I would like to invite you to participate in this study as you hold a unique position within the learning community that emphasizes student persistence, as evidenced by your reaching the attainment of your desired degree. Your academic and social experiences as a student within the Ball State University community will deepen and enrich my understanding of autonomy. As a first generation college student, your motivations, perspective, and experiences will greatly enhance the proposed research project.

This research is being conducted to inform a dissertation as partial fulfillment for a Ph.D. in Educational Studies. The findings of this study may be used to inform future educational research. The study will be conducted during November 2014, December of 2014, and January 2015. All data collected during this dissertation project will be maintained for a period not to exceed three (3) years beyond the conclusion of the Ph.D. in the Educational Studies in May 2015.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age, identify as a first generation college student (neither parent nor guardian having graduated from college), enrolled as student at Ball State University student who will be graduating within two (2) semesters or be a recent Ball State University graduate within two (2) years of this study. Nearing graduation or having graduated are indications that you have persisted in a course of study leading to a college degree within higher education. This aspect is of utmost importance, as the lived experiences of my participants will inform my study. The timeframe of one (1) year before and up to two (2) years after graduation will allow for greater memory recall and detail of pertinent information.

Participation Procedures and Duration
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in one (1) pre-interview meeting lasting approximately fifteen (15) to twenty (20) minutes and two (2) semi-structured interviews. Each interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will occur at a time and location convenient to the participant.

Audio Recordings
With your permission I would like to record the interviews by using an audio digital recorder. The interview recording will then be transcribed and coded for the identification of concepts and
themes. Names and other personal information will not be used in the transcriptions, as I will utilize pseudonyms to protect your identity.

**Data Confidentiality**
Any information that you provide will be kept confidential. Data from my study will be utilized for my dissertation, but will be maintained for two to three years for possible publications as a result of the dissertation. Each interview will be recorded using a digital audio recording device; however, before recording begins you will be asked for your consent. I will be using pseudonyms during the transcription phase as well as a system of coding, which will serve to eliminate all possible identifiers within the data. Only the researcher, Joshua Miller, and the Faculty Advisor, Dr. John Ambrosio, will have access to the interview recordings, observations, and field notes gathered during this study.

**Storage of Data**
The digital recorder with the interview recordings, as well as the interview transcriptions, observations, and reflections of the process in the form of field notes, will be stored on a password protected laptop computer secured in a locked file cabinet in the my home. Handwritten notes that may be generated from the interviews and observations will be maintained in my home, locked in a personal cabinet for which I will be the sole individual with access. All data, both raw and analyzed, will be maintained by the primary investigator for a period not to exceed three (3) years. The reason for the maintained time frame is for the possibility of future publications or presentations based upon the research findings of the dissertation. Upon the completion of the specified time line, all collected, transcribed, and generated materials, whether digital or hardcopy, will be either permanently deleted or shredded and destroyed.

**Risks or Discomforts**
The risks and discomfort associated with participation in this study are no greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. The overall experience is expected to be informative and generally positive in nature.

**Benefits**
The primary benefit of participation in this study is reflective in nature. For current students, participation allows individuals the opportunity to discuss their experiences and gain an understanding of the events that helped to support persistence of the academic journey. For recent graduates, participants are presented with the opportunity to consider the conditions and characteristics that contributed to the ability to persist and complete a rigorous course of study. This reflection has the potential to elucidate strengths that would be beneficial during the search for meaningful employment, as indicated via cover letters and interviews.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time, for any reason, without penalty or prejudice from me. Please feel comfortable and free to ask any questions before signing this form and at any point during the study.
Participation Incentive
There are no incentives associated with participation in this study.

Who to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study
Communication, concerns, or questions are welcome at any time throughout the dissertation process. Participant experiencing any negative effects from participation should contact the BSU Counseling Center, Lucina Hall, room 320, Muncie, IN 47306, 765-285-2081, counselctr@bsu.edu.

Who to Contact Regarding IRB Approval
Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306. 765-285-5070 or irb@bsu.edu

Consent
I, __________________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “The Autonomous Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First Generation College Students who Persist”. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

________________________________________       _____________________________
Participant’s Signature                      Date

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator: Joshua Miller, Doctoral Student
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. John Ambrosio
Educational Studies: Associate Professor of Social Foundations
Ball State University: Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306: Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: (260) 241-2770: Telephone: (765) 285-8556
Email: jlmiller2@bsu.edu: Email: jambrosio@bsu.edu

This project has been reviewed and approved by Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306: IRBNet Protocol Number: # 649261-1
Appendix C: Participant Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Project: The Autonomous Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First Generation College Students who Persist

Time of Interview:
Date:
Location:
Interviewer: Joshua Miller
Interviewee:

Note: This protocol is a guide only and open to the needs of the process as the researcher seeks to search for the core elements of the phenomenon under investigation.

General Questions for Interview #1

1. Please describe your connection / relationship to Ball State University:
   a. Academic year, graduate, transfer, major, minor
2. Autonomy, as defined by Dworkin (1988) involves the action or inaction of an individual as well as the attitudes or motivations behind those actions. How do you define autonomy?
3. How would you describe instances during your college years where you exercised your definition of autonomy?
4. Under what type of conditions did you develop your definition of autonomy while in college?
5. What factors influenced your decision to attend college?
6. When did you initially consider attending college?
7. Would you consider attending college an option or an expectation? How so?
8. Would you say that you experienced the freedom to make the final decision to attend? How did that make you feel?
9. How would you describe the motivations that led you to actually enroll in college?
10. Were you encouraged to attend college, if so, how?
11. Were you discouraged from attending college, if so, how?
12. Thinking back to your first few weeks as a college student, can you describe your experiences?
13. Can you describe for me your experience with making independent decisions concerning your social and academic choices while in college?
14. Were there any circumstances when you considered dropping out of college?
15. Can you describe an instance during your college years where you held an opinion or idea that was contrary to the general consensus?
16. When considering controversial topics often debated on college campuses such as abortion, religion, politics, how would you describe your willingness to share your opinions?

Questions for interview #2 will be informed by the response(s) received during interview #1. The following questions are to be used as guidelines.
Remembering that Autonomy, as defined by Dworkin (1988) involves the action or inaction of an individual as well as the attitudes or motivations behind those actions:

1. Refresh the conversation: How do you define autonomy?
2. Who controls your destiny?
3. Go back to push on external support (if any) or obstacle (if any) to your decision to attend college.
4. Do / did you feel autonomous while in college? If yes, how so? If not, what would have changed that?